

Tobacco Companies Target Black Community for Disease and Death

Former Industry Manager Sounds the Alarm

By Adeeba Folami



La Tanisha Wright sits beside a KOOL MIXX promotional display containing 4 packs of free cigarettes with hip hop themed designs. To the right of the display is a Kool & Kustom Hot Wheels toy car. Green and blue are Kool cigarette's signature colors as are the interlocking O's. Even if an item (like the Hot Wheel) is not tagged as a Kool cigarette product, the colors give it away.

"You've come a long way, baby," was a 1970s advertising slogan for Virginia Slims cigarettes, at least one of which featured a Black woman with an afro, African print tunic top and bell-bottom jeans. Considering, however, that Blacks were at one time forced, as slaves, to pick tobacco and bring great wealth to Caucasian-owned companies, some disagree that Blacks have come a long way when they are the group most devastated by the tobacco industry today.

La Tanisha Wright, Western Region Director for the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network (NAATPN), presented a workshop Saturday at the Bo Matthews Center to "raise awareness about how Big Tobacco specifically targets Black communities." The 5 hour seminar was entitled "Follow the Signs" (FTS) and was attended by nearly 30 activists, residents and representatives of youth organizations. Johnn Young, a Health Education Specialist for Denver Health

Medical Center's (DHMC) Denver Public Health Program said the hospital was a chief sponsor along with input from the Black United Fund, American Cancer Society, Bacchus Network, Dept. of Health and Environment and Dept. of Behavioral Science.

Wright laid out the facts that slave labor made the tobacco industry rich and that now, half of all deaths in the Black community are from smoking-related diseases; more Blacks die from lung cancer than any other group in the U.S.; 3 of 4 Black smokers prefer menthol cigarettes as do 90% of Black youth; 72% of Blacks are exposed to secondhand smoke, compared to 50% of Whites and 45% of Hispanics; and that smoking or secondhand smoke play a large part in the high rate of asthma amongst Black adults and children.

Wright finds the statistics disturbing given that Blacks are not the majority population group in America and she thinks the disparities have much to do

with tobacco companies deliberately targeting "urban" areas which are referred to as the "focus" market of cigarette companies. She knows this very well as she was employed for a leading company as a tobacco industry manager "responsible for developing promotional programs for urban markets." After four years of firsthand experience, in 2005 she kissed the industry good bye and joined NAATPN to begin spreading the word and sounding an alarm to Blacks across the country. She said if she knew then what she knows now, she would never have become part of the tobacco industry.

Industry "preys" on Blacks

Many Blacks are unaware that cigarette companies were some of the first to advertise with Black media in the 1950s; that they study and learn everything about Blacks in order to devise advertising campaigns to "lure" new smokers as customers; that the companies, Wright said, will do anything to

sell nicotine—even lie and practice deception, and that the industry "preys" on Blacks because there is no outcry and they know they can get away with it.

Wright went on to explain that there are three major companies: Philip Morris (PM), marketing: Marlboro, Alpine, Basic, Benson & Hedges, Bristol, Cambridge, Chesterfield, Commander, Dave's, English Ovals, Lark, L&M, Merit, Parliament, Players, Saratoga and Virginia Slims. The Lorillard Company, producer of Newport, Kent, True, Old Gold, Maverick, Satin, Max; and RJ Reynolds (RJR), maker of: Camel, Pall Mall, Winston, Salem, Kool, Doral, Misty, Capri, Lucky Strike, Monarch, Carlton, GPC, Private-label Brands, Tareyton, More, Now, Eclipse, Vantage.

PM is the largest company, followed by RJR which Wright said is the one that targets Black customers the most. Money is the bottom line for these companies and they have found a cash-

cow via the Black consumer. An RJR executive was quoted in a 1993 major magazine editorial making a shocking statement in relation to his company's products and those who bought them. "We don't smoke the sh*t, we reserve that right for the poor, the young, the black and the stupid."

Menthol most popular with Blacks

RJR is the top seller of menthol-flavored cigarettes, the flavor preferred by the majority of Black smokers. The Kool and Newport brands are the leading menthols on the market but studies show these flavored smokes may be more hazardous than the standard flavor. "There is evidence that mentholated cigarettes may promote the penetration and spreading of particles resulting in a higher rate of lung cancer," reads the FTS textbook. "Menthol smokers may be more likely to inhale deeper with each drag and potentially take in more nicotine than

Continued on next page