

Tobacco Companies Target Black Community for Disease and Death

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smokers of non-menthol cigarettes.”

Last year, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) pushed for legislation to ban menthol but, interestingly, President Barack Obama – himself a smoker – signed another smoking related bill into law last week. House Resolution 1256, entitled The Family Smoking Prevention Act requires that tobacco companies now answer to the Food and Drug Administration regarding cigarette ingredients but also in several other ways, one of which is that “charity” cigarettes will no longer be allowed to be given out as free samples in direct mail promotions, at events or other venues. There are also new advertising restrictions which companies must adhere to. Wright said the price of cigarettes may go up as a result of what is in the 80+ page bill and she encourages all to read it.

Based on HR 1256, menthol may be banned by 2011 but some observers question why other flavors were banned in the legislation but menthol was not. In an editorial published by Reuters.com, Paul Smalera called out CBC members who, despite their stand against menthol last year, still supported the new law. “Philip Morris’ parent company has donated more than \$1.5 million to the caucus since 2002 and thousands more to individual members,” he wrote in “Cool, Refreshing Legislation for Philip Morris,” going on to suggest that the CBC is more concerned with big money than with standing for a ban against menthol. Smalera said 20 CBC members co-sponsored the bill; 10 did not sponsor but represent states “that oppose the bill because it puts their tobacco companies at a disadvantage to Philip Morris.” PM, he said, was a key part of drafting the legislation in the first place. The remaining CBC members did not sign off on the bill.

Urban areas cluttered with cigarette ads

Philip Morris, Wright explained in her seminar, dominates the Caucasian or “non-focus” markets and marketing differences between focus and non-focus areas is seen in the excessive number of cigarette ads found on the exteriors of stores in Black communities, many of them placed at the eye level of children and teens rather than adults. It is rare that stores in White communities are cluttered with signage in the same way.

Wright said she has confronted store owners in the past who place tobacco advertisements near toy or candy aisles. Such placement, she said, is against the law but still occurs. Even though the three leading companies all have anti-smoking or youth smoking prevention programs, Wright views them as shams since most marketing by the tobacco giants is geared toward capturing the attention of youth.

Kool developed a hip hop themed video game and a display box containing cigarette packs with images of deejays, people dancing, men with locs or hats turned to the side and posing in hip-hop stances. The ad text read: “DJs are the masters of Hip Hop, just like KOOL is the master



(l-r) DHMC reps Johnn Young and Tracey Maruyama hold tobacco products which companies pattern after children's or women's items to make them more appealing to youth. Young holds in one hand a Skoal Berry Blend Tobacco container looking very similar to Icebreakers Sour Berry Candy. He also holds a Skoal Apple Blend product which looks like the Hubba Bubba Sour Green Apple Bubble Gum container. Maruyama holds Virginia Slims Superlines Light Cigarettes which look like a container which could store the Cover Girl Lip Slicks next to them. She also has a box of Jolly Rancher Fruit Chews which at first glance could be mistaken for a pack of Camel cigarettes which make use of similar colors and box shape.

of menthol. KOOL MIXX is our mark of respect for these Hip Hop players.”

Wright said the display was mailed out and that companies usually send their direct mailings during the summer or around holidays when children are more likely to be at home. There have been instances, she continued, where teen girls have received cigarette advertisements in the mail after subscribing to fashion magazines. Kool even sponsors summer time jazz festivals fea-



Nigger Hair Tobaccowas popular in the early 1900s and was so named because the tobacco was cut in long, curly strands. Many Blacks are unaware of the true historical links between tobacco and Blacks in America, devastating ties which continue today.



turing artists popular to fans of R&B and Hip hop.

Certain companies include coupons for items like X-box games on their cartons, coupons which catch the attention of children and youth. Other items offered free are white tee shirts (popularized by the hip hop song by Dem Franchize Boys); shower radios; dominoes; hoodies and designer purses. Wright recalled witnessing companies providing smoking rooms for youth at industry events. Those too young to enter the main venue were directed to buses set up outside where those underage could go in, obtain free cigarettes and smoke without interference.

Nigger hair tobacco

A disturbing and little known part of Wright's workshop involved her sharing information about Nigger Hair Tobacco, popular in the early 1900s. She passed around a copy of an ad for the product which was sold in packs costing from .05 to .50 cents. “Our grandfathers knew this tobacco and gave the brand its name, NIGGER HAIR, because it was cut in those long, curly strands that make it such a wonderful, satisfactory pipe tobacco – slow burning, cool and fragrant,” the ad read. “That distinctive cut caused the old-time smokers to call it “NIGGER HAIR” and so it got its name.”

From the days of slavery, when Blacks were not only required to pick tobacco but were also bought with tobacco payments, to today, the industry appears to need the Black consumer or slave to survive. Wright even used a quote by

Harriet Tubman to describe how she views her mission. “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.”

What some heard from Wright deeply affected them and almost moved them to tears. “I don't know whether to cry or get sick to my stomach,” Leslie Matthews told DWN. “It's really disgusting to see this; to know what's going on and not seeing more programs out there to break our addiction to tobacco.” The 58-year-old noted that her parents and grandfather smoked and she started in her early teens, not quitting until her late 20s. Her father and grandfather later died of lung cancer, even though her father did not start to smoke until he joined the military during World War II. She felt angered after remembering Wright's lesson that free cigarettes were given to Blacks during the Civil War and other U.S. wars. “I just want to cry,” Matthews said, adding that young people would never start smoking if they knew the history. “A part of me is angry, not only at the tobacco companies but ourselves. We're always running around talking about genocide; well at some point we have to take control of our own lives.” She plans to be part of any organized efforts to promote awareness and the NAATPN mission.

Yvette Anderson was also moved and motivated to share what she learned with everyone she knew. “I had some awareness of tobacco marketing in the Black community but this really brought home the kind of deceptive practices that big tobacco [uses] to market, especially to our youth,” she said. She has never smoked but is sure some smokers would decide to quit if they knew the true and historic ties between tobacco and Blacks. “Because it's an addiction, it would be hard for people to suddenly change but I think a percentage of smokers probably would stop.”

Young said the workshop was just the beginning of local efforts and plans are underway to establish a Colorado NAATPN chapter. For more information call him at 303-602-3713, or visit www.naatpn.org, for help to stop smoking call the Colorado Quit-Line, 800-QUIT-NOW, www.coquitline.org.