

Kids wage film war on smoking

Swanton students know 'Ugly Effects'

By LEON THOMPSON
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SWANTON VILLAGE — "Entertainment Tonight" missed its story of the year Wednesday during the red carpet, world premier of "The Ugly Effects of Smoking," a movie filmed in Swanton.

The young stars on hand — minus the usual celebrities, Julia, Brad, Reese and Heath — shined under the spotlight as they introduced their eight-min-

ute, anti-smoking film to about 60 people in the Swanton Central School Library.

"Anytime we can put tobacco in its place is a good day," said James Valastro, of Meme Films, who collaborated on the movie with 20 Swanton fifth and sixth graders. Meme Films, of Burlington, is a youth-focused media literacy and indie film company.

The students, who are on Swanton Central School's Vermont Kids Against Tobacco (VKAT) team, learned about Meme Films' work and mission while at a youth training last October. They returned to Franklin County eager to make a



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James Valastro, filmmaker

movie.

Dr. Rob Williams, of Meme Films, then went to Swanton Central and gave fifth and sixth graders a presentation about truth in advertising, particularly with tobacco products.

"It was great to show the kids

that they have control over the decisions they make, and that they have the power to make change," said Katy Thompson, school guidance counselor and project liaison.

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Filming lasted one day in January, at the Mary S. Babcock School. About \$4,000 in grants from the Title VII Indian Education Program, Franklin County Caring Communities, and the Agency of Human Services paid for the project.

The film opens with students standing in a line outside, passing a megaphone around and demanding that the tobacco industry leave them alone.

"Stop targeting us!" they yell.

There are also clips of a tobacco executive denying to federal lawmakers that his industry markets to children, and a gorilla smoking a fat cigar.

The students perform in short, "Electric Company"-esque skits that discuss the dangers of smoking and how cigarette ads focus on youth.

"Cigarettes do not make you beautiful," one student says on screen. "They don't make you cool, and they don't make you popular."

Ninety percent of new tobacco users are children and teens, according to one of many facts cited in the movie. Also, the film claims a two-pack-a-day smoker spends \$300 a month on cigarettes.

However, only two out of 10 Vermont teens smoke, a staggering statistic that has even generated a Web site (www.8outof10.com).

Research shows that the number of teen tobacco users has dropped dramatically statewide. The 1999 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicated that 31 percent of students in grades eight through 12 were smokers.

The 2005 YRBS reported that the number of adolescent smokers had dropped to 16 percent, meaning 84 out of every 100 Vermont teens are tobacco-free.

"If middle school youth think that most high-schoolers are smoking, they might feel they need to light up in order to fit

in," said Amy Brewer, Franklin-Grand Isle Tobacco Prevention Coordinator.

"We want our middle school students to know the truth — eight out of 10 high school students don't smoke — and to stay smoke-free themselves," Brewer said.

The Swanton students giggled when they saw themselves on screen last night. Their parents gave them rousing ovations after each screening. (The students were so proud of their work, they showed it twice.)

Coincidentally, their anti-smoking movie premier happened two days before the April 7 opening of "Thank You for Smoking," a satirical film about a Washington tobacco lobbyist that has garnered early raves.

The movie stars part-time Vermonter William H. Macy as — yup — a Vermont senator.

Swanton fifth grader Leif Mitchinson has harbored long-time aspirations of being an actor. "The Ugly Effects of

Smoking" was his first film, and he learned a lot about the movie-making process, especially that it can take 48 takes to wrap a scene.

"This guy is a natural actor," Valastro said of Mitchinson, as the student signed an autograph for a classmate. "He will jump in with two feet and do anything you want him to."

Mitchinson learned something else during production: He will never smoke. His mother, Tanya, said he scared his grandmother — a former 40-year smoker — into quitting, after he insisted cigarettes would kill her.

Tanya had no qualms about her son being in the movie.

"I thought it was a good message, and that he wanted to be part of that message," she said.

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The Swanton students are accepting invitations to show their film. For more information, contact Katy Thompson at 868-5346.

