

## Crosby Scholars Program teaches youth tobacco prevention with Right Decisions Right Now summer camp



*Instructor Marissa Dancy interacts with students at the camp.*

The Crosby Scholars Program in Winston-Salem, N.C., has had great success with its Right Decisions Right Now: Be Tobacco Free (RDRN) summer camps, with student interaction at its center.

“Our partnership with RDRN has a very positive impact on students early on, before they get in with the wrong peer group or try things before they’re emotionally ready,” said Mona W. Lovett, president and chief executive officer of Crosby Scholars.

The Reynolds American Foundation has sponsored the Crosby Scholars Program for many years, but in 2012 the two entities joined forces to provide the tools to educate youth on the dangers of tobacco use. The RDRN program, funded by R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, is the center of three Crosby Scholars summer camps each year. Each camp lasts four days and includes different grade groups.

“For us it’s been great,” said Lovett. “One of the challenges for parents is finding opportunities for students to interact in positive activities over the summer.”

At the inception of the RDRN camp, the foundation awarded Crosby Scholars a \$250,000 grant to be paid over five years, and \$125,000 of that money is being used for the free camps.

“The initiative is part of a commitment by Reynolds American and its subsidiaries to accelerate the decline in youth tobacco use,” said Alan Caldwell, Reynolds American Inc.’s (RAI) director of corporate and civic engagement and the foundation’s executive director.

The Crosby Scholars Program is a nonprofit college-access organization and is available, free of charge, to public-school students in grades 6 to 12 in Forsyth County. Crosby Scholars has a 23-year history of providing academic training, college application workshops and financial aid. The program now reaches more than 8,900 students in Forsyth County.

Students may join Crosby Scholars as early as sixth grade or as late as 10th grade. By the time students reach their senior year of high school, they have been exposed to a wide range of subjects in order to prepare them for successful college enrollment. Youth tobacco prevention is now just one of the many subjects students have access to.

The RDRN program was independently developed and launched in 1991. The evidence-based program is offered free of charge to educators, parents and grandparents, youth-focused community groups.

RDRN was tested nationally and found to be successful on two key measures: Recent smoking levels decreased significantly in test schools, and anticipated tobacco use among middle school-aged students also decreased. In addition, students' susceptibility to peer pressure and their perception of the popularity of tobacco-using peers showed significant declines versus control groups.

### **RDRN & Crosby Scholars: What they get right**



*An officer with the Winston-Salem Police Department answers questions.*

Crosby Scholars has developed a unique way of presenting the RDRN program. Using the free materials provided online, the classes are conducted by local science teacher Marissa Dancy. Dancy works to keep the camps interactive by engaging students with various activities, from creating skits to making posters.

“We want the students to not only hear the information, but interact with it,” said Miriam Hernandez, Hispanic outreach coordinator for Crosby Scholars, who organizes and facilitates the RDRN camps. “Ms. Dancy is able to really engage the students and get them thinking about the material.”

Besides leading interaction with the materials, the Crosby Scholars Program has found other methods of ensuring success with the summer camp.

Each camp consists of about 50 students and four Crosby Scholars personnel. The camp involves four half-days of learning. The first three days focus on teaching the students the RDRN curriculum, and the fourth day is dedicated to taking the students on an interactive field trip.

For the field trip, students go to either the Forsyth County Department of Public Health or the Winston-Salem Police Department for a presentation.

Health officials talk to the students about the potentially harmful effects tobacco can have on youth. Later in the day, a police officer goes through the student handbook and explains the ramifications of being caught with tobacco products, alcohol, illegal drugs or illicit paraphernalia on school grounds.

“When the police officer walks in, you can hear a pin drop,” said Hernandez. “Getting the children to see and hear the material up close and in person really hits home and helps them remember the information later on.”

Students who complete the RDRN summer camp at any point during their time with Crosby Scholars are eligible for a \$1,000 scholarship in their senior year of high school. Students have to write an essay about what they learned from RDRN and how they used those skills in subsequent years.

Of students who write essays, three are chosen to receive a scholarship. In 2015, the first set of students to go through the camp became eligible and the first three scholarships were awarded.

“Giving the students the incentive of a scholarship helps them retain the information longer,” said Lovett.

“They remember what they learn in this camp so much longer than other material.”

Another successful tactic that Crosby Scholars uses: Teaching the students what leadership is and how a leader behaves.

“We ask them, ‘Who wants to be a leader?’ and they all raise their hands. Then we ask them, ‘If someone offers you a cigarette and you take it, are you being a leader or a follower?’” said Hernandez. “Everyone wants to be a leader; no one wants to be a follower.”

### **RDRN & Crosby Scholars: What they learned**

When Crosby Scholars initially began offering the RDRN camp, the structure was different.

“We tried longer days, but anything after lunch loses attention,” said Hernandez. “You could do the curriculum in two big days or one very long day, but students are antsy in the summer, so working it for four half-days is most effective.”

By switching the camp to shorter days, Crosby Scholars was able to increase students’ attention spans during the sessions.

During the camp, students are given a notebook with relevant materials, one of which is the Right Decisions, Right Now: Be Tobacco Free pledge. Students who sign the pledge agree not to smoke cigarettes or use smokeless tobacco products. Students are given the opportunity to sign the pledge at the end of the last session.

When one camp would end, Crosby Scholars collected the students’ notebooks to be reused with later camps.

From this, another lesson emerged: Students wanted to keep the notebooks.

“Students would ask if they could keep it or come ask me months later if they could please have their notebook back,” said Hernandez. “They use them in school for science projects, and the notebooks help them later when they apply for the RDRN scholarship.”

Now Crosby Scholars makes sure that each student gets to keep the materials he or she is given during the camp for later reference and use.