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When teens took on tobacco



By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST FEBRUARY 13, 2014

When CVS announced it would stop selling tobacco products last week, an extra loud cheer went up in Codman Square.

That's where the push to get cigarettes off pharmacy shelves was begun 14 years ago, by a bunch of kids who took on a giant, seemingly unwinnable battle because they didn't know any better.

Funded with tobacco settlement money and based at the Codman Square Health Center, they're called BOLD Teens, where BOLD stands for Breath of Life Dorchester. They saw their neighborhood right at the center of Big Tobacco's target zone, and they didn't like it. Storefronts were plastered with ads selling the same cigarettes that had killed their loved ones. In 1999, the sly tobacco pitches were everywhere, including in the pages of a certain local broadsheet. This newspaper was their first target.

"The Globe was right down the street from us," said Cynthia Loesch, one of BOLD's leaders back then. BOLD got a meeting with the paper to talk about cigarette ads, but it didn't seem to lead to much. But when they then scheduled a press conference to call the paper out, the Globe changed its policy, announcing it would stop carrying tobacco ads.

"After that, you couldn't tell these little teenagers anything," Loesch recalled, laughing.

Loesch was 13 then, and already formidable. Now 28, with a few months left at Northeastern University law school, she seems destined for world domination, though she still looks like a teen. She comes from activist stock. Her father, the Rev. Dr. Bill

Loesch, joined Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Ala., in 1965, and was jailed. He has been such a fixture of civic life in Codman Square that the city named a park for him.

After the teens' first victory, he urged his daughter, and others, on to their next target: pharmacies. "They can't say, 'Come here to get healthy' on one hand, and on the other hand sell a product that is guaranteed to kill you," Cynthia Loesch said. This seems blindingly obvious now, but at the time, there was plenty of resistance. So BOLD began picketing local pharmacies. Every day in the summer of 2000, the teens stood out, holding signs that read: "Tobacco Kills!! Stop Selling It!" It made business owners uncomfortable.

"I got this backlash from merchants who said, 'Can't you stop them from doing this?'" recalled Bill Walczak, who ran the health center. He couldn't. Nobody could. BOLD Teens relentlessly lobbied the Boston Public Health Commission, urging it to ban cigarettes from pharmacies citywide, a step no US city had taken at the time. The teens were the ones who put the issue on the city's radar, say health commission officials, and kept it there, lobbying for years.

The city finally barred pharmacies from selling cigarettes in 2008. Eventually, 79 Massachusetts communities followed. Last week, CVS extended the prohibition to all of its stores.

"Tobacco products have no place in a setting where health care is delivered," CVS chief Larry Merlo said. Yeah, a teenager could have told you that — 14 years ago. Loesch and her comrades were thrilled at the announcement. "We've managed to change the mind-set," she said.

But plenty more needs doing. The neighborhood is crammed with fast-food joints that fuel obesity and diabetes. So Cynthia Loesch and others began the Codman Square Farmer's Market. See this world domination thing taking shape?

And CVS is but one tobacco vendor among many. So, Bill Loesch and the current generation of BOLD Teens are preparing an assault on Stop & Shop. "If CVS can stop, you can stop," the junior activists will say. And they'll keep saying it, until the supermarket cries uncle.

Fueled by their victories, the kids in Codman Square have this skewed notion that this is the way the world actually works: If something is wrong, you can fix it.

Go figure.

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