

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Putting a face on tobacco threat

Software lets students experience visually how a smoking habit will spoil their appearance

By HAROLD McNEIL
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Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News
Jeannie Vega, a sixth-grader at Tonawanda Middle School, gets a shocking, computer-simulated look at how drastically she would age in 20 years if she were to become a smoker. Another photo on the Picture Page, C10.

Jeannie Vega already had some idea what cigarette smoking could do to her insides, but when she saw the damage a pack-a-day, 20-year habit might wreak on her face. . . .

"I'm going to be old and ugly!" Jeannie shrieked.

Using digital snapshots and special, science-based age-progression software, Jeannie and about 150 other Tonawanda Middle School and High School students Wednesday got to face the future and see just how poorly they might age if they take up the nicotine habit.

Young people like Jeannie, an 11-year-old sixth-grader, are often unimpressed by the long-term health risks associated with smoking, according to Patricia E. Hysert, director of the Task Force for Tobacco-Free Women and Girls at Roswell Park Cancer Institute. It's a more visceral experience when the approach appeals to their vanity, she said.

"They're always interested in seeing how they'll look older, but after seeing this demonstration, they do acknowledge that smokers look uglier or that they do get

older before their time," Hysert said as she demonstrated the technology for curious students.

The software she used to dramatize the outward effects of smoking was developed five years ago by Aprilage Development, a Toronto-based company.

"The objective of the software is to take the results of the research we've done over the last five years studying 7,000 people's faces and those aging characteristics associated with smokers, from changes in color to wrinkle patterns, and thereby predict what they might look like in 20 or more years, depending on whether they're a smoker or not," said Ron Estey, the company's president.

"The objective is, of course, to provide a tool that health professionals can use to encourage kids not to smoke."

According to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, nearly 52 million packs of cigarettes sold in New York last year were either purchased or smoked by people younger than 18.

Watching a simulation of his own creepy transformation from creaseless to craggy certainly convinced 14-year-old eighth-grader Grant Del Prince not to smoke.

"It was kind of, like, freaky, sort of, when I saw the wrinkles on my face," Grant said. "I'm already around a lot of people who smoke, but I don't want to."

And that was encouraging for Tonawanda Middle School health teacher Daryle Macro.

"We've been working the last couple of weeks on smoking and tobacco use, creating anti-smoking posters and advocating nonsmoking," he said. "This is resonating at the middle school level. The whole thing is not to start, because kids have a lot of pressure to start at this age."

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e-mail: hmcneil@buffnews.com

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