



Look Out Big Tobacco: The Power of Youth Advocacy

What's small but mighty, and often a minor, yet still a major force? Youth tobacco-control advocates. In their enthusiasm and command of policy-makers' attention, they are a real threat to big tobacco. Since 1997, the [Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#) has sought to highlight and harness the power of youth advocates.

Each year, through the [Youth Advocates of the Year Awards](#), the Campaign honors top youth advocates from across the country—youth who have fought hard to promote tobacco-control legislation in their home states, reduce tobacco marketing to young people in their communities and stop their peers from using tobacco.

Recognizing Youth Advocates: The YAYA Awards

The Campaign awards scholarships ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000 to national and regional YAYA winners, as they are called, at an annual gala in Washington. There, youth advocates meet one another and participate in advocacy events and training workshops, including ones on media strategy, public speaking and youth empowerment. They return to their home states energized and connected with other youth advocates around the country.

The North Carolina [Question Why](#) (?Y) program won the 2007 YAYA Group Award. *Question Why* offers "Tobacco 101," a basic course for educating youth about tobacco companies as well as the health effects and ingredients of tobacco products, and "Tobacco 202," which explores the political, cultural, historical and economic impacts of tobacco.

For three years, Aidil Collins has been a program coordinator for *Question Why*. The organization got its start in 2001 with funding from RWJF (ID# 033461) and the North Carolina Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch. Collins said *Question Why* uses a train-the-trainer model.

"It just keeps spreading across the state," said Collins. "Youth do their own advocacy work and train others. Once they are trained, they can start their own tobacco-control advocacy programs in their own counties. Every region has unique advocacy needs. For example, the mountain region—a more rural area—does a lot more work on spit tobacco."

The program also embraces the concept of youth empowerment. From the outset, youth helped carve the goals for *Question Why*. Also see [Program Results](#) for more information on the RWJF grant for *Question Why*.

"In the 1990s, North Carolina recognized that the adult-only approach to tobacco control just wasn't working," said Collins. "We wanted to try something different. *Question Why* started as an experiment. It became North Carolina's number one youth tobacco program and is now funded by money from the [Master Settlement Agreement](#)."

Telling Kool It Isn't Cool: Ending a Marketing Campaign Aimed at Youth

Chad Bullock of Durham, North Carolina, was a regional YAYA winner in 2007 and heavily involved in *Question Why* at the time. Then a high school junior, Chad led a project opposing Brown & Williamson's Kool Mixx marketing campaign, which utilized hip-hop images and music to market cigarettes. He collaborated with the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network and worked with other youth advocates to collect examples of Kool advertisements and promotions, documenting possible tobacco settlement violations. Chad also wrote a letter to North Carolina Attorney General Roy Cooper and helped to spark the joint effort between attorneys general and advocates that brought an end to the Kool Mixx campaign.

"I first got involved with *Question Why* in 2004 when I was in 9th grade," said Chad. "I was walking past the career counseling office in my school and noticed a poster with the words, 'Wanna Make a Change?' I called the number and I've been involved ever since."

When Chad made the transition from high school to college, he tempered his involvement with tobacco control the first semester, explaining that he needed to find a balance between this work and his schoolwork. He curtailed the traveling and presentations to focus on his classes. With his first year of college behind him, Chad describes his commitment to tobacco control as "intense."

"My life is consumed by tobacco control right now," said Chad. "I travel around the country—from Florida to California and everywhere in between—training youth to become advocates, helping them learn how to use the media and work with policy-makers."

To organize his advocacy efforts and schoolwork, Chad created a master calendar that stretches through a semester. He makes advance arrangements with his professors to reschedule tests and completes his papers and other work ahead of time. In the midst of all this juggling, Chad conceived the idea for a national, totally youth-led tobacco prevention program. He is working with other youth to flesh out the program and find funding.

What has Chad learned as a youth advocate? "As youth, we have so much to say. Through the media and by working with elected officials, we can really have a voice. The tools and resources are available, and with them you can take on any project."

Finding a Voice—and a Career—in Tobacco-Control Advocacy

Vicki Herbert, another youth advocate, was a 2002 YAYA finalist for the Eastern Regional Award. She got involved with tobacco control in sixth grade through a local youth group in Dover, Delaware. Once Vicki connected with the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids when she was in high school, her advocacy work kicked up many notches.

"In 2003, I was part of the planning for Kick Butts Day, working to redesign the Kick Butts Day Guide and all the gear," said Vicki. "Then, I attended a week-long youth advocacy symposium, and in 2006, I did a summer internship in the Campaign's Youth Advocacy department. During my internship, I helped plan a summer symposium that provided youth advocacy training across the globe. I learned so much and saw the inside of youth advocacy."

Vicki graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2006 with an associate degree and moved on to Granite State College, where she has a self-designed major in nonprofit management. She ultimately hopes to pursue a career in tobacco control or in the nonprofit health field. Vicki counts the YAYA awards and her connection with the Campaign as pivotal in this decision about her study and career paths.

"The campaign picks the leaders—the best youth advocates in the country—recognizes them and gives them opportunities to advance within the field," said Vicki. "They teach us how to do tobacco-control advocacy: how to lobby, how to talk to the media, how to educate the public. It's really an amazing group they select and they go on to do big things."

Aidil Collins, Chad Bullock and Vicki Herbert all agree that the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids takes the voice of youth seriously. As Chad commented, "Young people are out there making changes. It is becoming the norm. Community service is such a cool thing!"

Matt Myers, J.D., president of the Campaign, concurs. "We genuinely believe youth are part and parcel of the movement," he said. "They can work on the same issues as adults and they can influence policy. We brought a respect for what youth can accomplish to the tobacco-control movement. The youth believe government needs to listen to them, and they believe they can do something about things they do not like. Ultimately, youth activism will have an impact far beyond tobacco."