

Brian Davis: Big tobacco targeting S.J.'s youth with \$1 deals

By Brian Davis Special to the Mercury News

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Several nights a week, young, attractive employees of tobacco companies can be found in the bars and clubs in downtown San Jose, blocks away from the San Jose State University campus. They obtain young people's IDs through a machine that records their information, and they also collect their emails and phone numbers. In exchange, they receive "One Pack for One Buck" coupons that can only be redeemed that night at the bar and other discount offers. And this isn't just a one-time "sign-up bonus." Every night, they can come back to get more coupons for more \$1 deals.

That's right -- a pack of cigarettes for just a dollar! It's been a long time since you could buy cigarettes at the store for a dollar. Back then, many more people smoked than today. This is not a coincidence. More than 100 studies have shown conclusively that as tobacco prices rise, the smoking rate drops. This is especially true of young people who tend to have less money to spare and therefore are more responsive to changes in tobacco prices.

All the young people I have worked with in smoking cessation programs tell me that one of the main reasons they want to quit is because of the cost of tobacco. Without that incentive to quit, many of them would not have been there.

Big Tobacco knows this, of course. They know that if they can get these still vulnerable, still malleable young people hooked by age 25, they likely will have a customer for (a much shorter) life.

If you think that this is all OK because "adults have the right to choose to smoke," you're missing the point. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention repeatedly has measured smokers' desire to quit. Their results show that consistently about 70 percent of smokers want to stop but can't because nicotine is so addictive.

We have more than 1,200 signatures on our petition urging the city of San Jose to stop Big Tobacco from offering these extreme discounts to our young people at bars. About 10 percent of the signees are smokers who wish they had never started and want to do what they can to help stop young people from making the same, often deadly, mistake.

Our "Butt Out of Our Bars" campaign is endorsed by 21 organizations, including Asian Americans for Community Involvement, BAYMEC, The Billy DeFrank LGBT Community Center, The LGBTQ Youth Space, Colectivo ALA, The San Jose chapter of the NAACP, the Santa Clara County Democratic and Green Parties, the Santa Clara County Health Department, Working Partnerships USA and many others. These organizations understand that the health of the entire community is threatened when tobacco companies are allowed to target our young adults in the bars.

Our proposal will be getting its first full hearing before the City Council later this month. If you'd like to help ensure that San Jose offers the same protections to its citizens as every other major city in the Bay Area, you can reach me at bdavis@tri-cityhealth.org.

Brian Davis is the California Tobacco Control Program coordinator at Tri-City Health Center in Fremont. He wrote this article for this newspaper.