

Reality Check Teens Celebrate End of School Year with “Chalk the Walk”



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Throughout my time being in Reality Check, I learned the many ways that smoking has been normalized in our culture. In my opinion, it started with cigarettes over a century ago, which led to addiction among many people, and sadly even disease and death that continues today. Now we deal with vaping. Big Tobacco companies view us as replacement smokers for their deadly products. Did you know the average age of a new smoker is 13 years old? While looking at the numerous ways people have become desensitized to the harms, and addicted to tobacco products, we also look at how these products have taken a drastic effect on our environment. I have always been interested in protecting the environment. I believe that the future of the earth begins with us. I am a part of a program supervised by Buffalo Niagara Waterkeepers, and from my participation in that program I have learned that they most often find cigarette butts on their cleanups. However, you don't need to be a part of an environmental program to realize this information. If you take a walk down to your local park, or even down your block, you might find cigarette butts on the sides of the street.

For World No Tobacco Day this year, an annual day dedicated to promoting putting down tobacco products, we held a “Chalk the Walk” event with my fellow peers from Reality Check, and we noticed cigarette butts all over Hyde Park. I am an avid believer that the cause of most problems of tobacco is the lack of education and awareness surrounding this topic. With that being said, I was ecstatic about bringing awareness and education by chalking facts big and bright about the toll of tobacco on our community. I hope as people walked by and read “Cigarette butts are the most common form of liter,” that they also looked at the road next to it, which in fact, had littered butts.

First off, cigarette butts ruin the aesthetic value of the environment, but they cause more harm than what meets the eye. Cigarettes cause air pollution, pollute waterways, and even pollute the soil. Cigarettes can deplete nutrients from the soil and increase nitrogen levels. This goes on to cause a bigger problem and affects the nitrogen cycle in a polluted area. When cigarettes get into our waterways, nicotine and other toxic chemicals seep into aquatic life and cause harm to many organisms. Tossing a cigarette on the side of the road might seem like it’s harmless until it intoxicates the soil, or it runs off into a body of water and starts intoxicating organisms.

The newest environmental problem that our generation faces is the problem of vaping. The biggest environmental problem about these vapes is that they are not disposed of properly. With vapes, we are not only dealing with the problem of chemicals getting into our waterways, soil, and air, we are also worried about microplastics that are in these products. The worst part of this scenario is that there are no good ways to dispose of these vapes, and they are just as toxic and battery waste. This needs to end!

Reality Check empowers youth locally and across New York State to become leaders by exposing what they see as the manipulative and deceptive marketing tactics of the tobacco industry. The tobacco industry’s marketing and promotion has long appealed to adolescents and young adults. Reality Check youth engage their peers and communities to take action and raise awareness about the benefits and the need for smoke-free and tobacco-free spaces. Additionally, youth work towards developing a tobacco-free norm, where secondhand smoke and tobacco litter are not part of the landscape of their community.

Reality Check is supported by [Tobacco-Free Erie & Niagara](#), a project administered by CAI that aims to advance tobacco-free communities in Erie and Niagara Counties through education, community mobilization, and policy change in order to reduce the burden of tobacco use and prevent future initiation.