

Spotlight: Madison County, NY Council Youth Win National Award



Reality Check is a New York State youth led movement aiming to reduce youth exposure to tobacco marketing. Recently, Madison-Oneida-Herkimer County Reality Check, operated by the NCADD Affiliate Madison County Council on Alcoholism & Substance Abuse, Inc., known as BRiDGES, was honored by [Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids](#) and recognized as the National Youth Advocate of the Year winners in the group category.

The Youth Advocates of the Year Awards, sponsored by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, are designed to honor the outstanding work of young advocates who have taken the lead in holding the tobacco companies accountable for their efforts to market products to youth.

The Awards recognize young activists who are fighting to protect their peers, communities, and the nation from the dangers of tobacco use through public education efforts, student-to-student training and outreach efforts to policymakers. Many have worked to change policies at the national, state and local levels that will limit youth access to tobacco, protect people from secondhand smoke, and ensure that tobacco prevention programs continue to receive funding. Their work inspires and motivates other young people to join their advocacy efforts.

Abby Hasting, 17, and Caeli Faisst, 18 both from Morrisville, NY, Nikki Lydford, 16, from Vernon Center, NY, and Megan Rogers, 17, from Sherburne, NY, represented their group by completing the application, submitting a video of their efforts and participating in a conference call for finalists with representatives from the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids.

In 2011, Reality Check youth have discovered and exposed two violations of the Master Settlement Agreement. The first came in the form of a new tin American Spirit pack, which could have been a



collectible, and since an entire cigarette pack could fit inside, smokers could avoid showing the new proposed graphic warning labels. The youth wrote the Attorney General and elected officials seeking their help. Reality Check was able to prevent these tins from gaining popularity because they were removed from shelves. The second violation was advertisements

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outside of a local gas station. After Reality Check measured the signs, the Attorney general contacted the tobacco companies. The signs have since been taken down, not only at the gas stations in the area, but at every station displaying the ads. This effort proved to local communities that tobacco companies are willing to stretch the rules to draw youth's attention and that Reality Check will not stand by and allow this practice.

This group, under the leadership of Coordinator, Heather Bernet, has initiated other projects that resulted in broad change on a national level. In 2005 Madison County Reality Check launched a project that ultimately revealed the ease with which youth could access tobacco products via the Internet. The study was repeated in 2006 and carried out statewide. Tobacco products were shipped to the homes of Reality Check youth and this sparked attention from the media and the New York State Attorney General's Office. The Congressmen at the time, John McHugh, had been working on a bill that would disallow the delivery of tobacco products by the United States Postal Service. Congressmen McHugh utilized our study during a congressional hearing, which ultimately resulted in the bill being passed. Additionally, the Attorney General's office used the information to alert credit card companies so they could take action against Internet tobacco vendors. Both the United States Post Office and United Postal Service changed their regulations regarding shipments of tobacco to consumers.



Reality Check's film, *Change*, based on the true story of one of their members losing his father when he was four to cancer caused by smoking, has been used statewide and in other states in the U.S. to raise awareness that tobacco companies target youth and spend over \$1 million a day in New York State alone to hook new, young smokers.

These youth advocates along with the eleven other members have worked tirelessly on tobacco control issues. Many of them are comfortable addressing large groups, and regularly advocate with local and state legislators. One of these advocates was invited to address the [Food and Drug Administration's Center for Tobacco Products](#) in Boston in September 2012. The four youths plan to use the award as a platform to create another film, this time focused on the issue of smoking in media rated for youth. These four advocates are excited to head to Washington, D.C. this May with their Coordinator, Heather Bernet, to accept this prestigious award.

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A copy of the YAYA application form is available on the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids web site.

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