

Lewis Diuguid: Age to buy tobacco must go up

By Lewis Diuguid
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As speakers talked about Tobacco 21|KC at a news conference last month, I kept drifting back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when my Southwest High School classmates in St. Louis protested for a student smoking lounge.

That was a crazy time. The civil rights movement had enabled a few of us black students to integrate the white school.

The Vietnam War was raging, and so were anti-war protests. Student-pressure for social change was everywhere but not always going in the right direction. There was pressure to lower the drinking age from 21 to 18. If 18-year-olds could be drafted, shipped to Vietnam and die for their country, they certainly were old enough to consume alcohol.

The same logic applied to smoking—nearly everyone did anyway. But like chewing gum in class, schools prohibited it. The students who smoked knew that the teacher's lounge was where the adults could light up.

They wanted the same privilege. So the protests started. Eventually the administration gave in, and a spare classroom was converted into a smoking lounge.

People decades ago were not as convinced as they are now of the dangers of smoking and the use of other tobacco products. Smoking causes cancer, stroke, heart disease, poor bone health, gum disease, tooth loss, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, preterm delivery, still birth, low birth weight, reduced fertility and premature aging.

Anyone knowing all of that would never even start to smoke. Yet, people did. When I entered high school in 1969, teens smoked because it was what the cool kids did. It made some feel tough or grown.

Their parents smoked, and so did my mom and dad. I never thought it was worthwhile.

Tobacco 21|KC is an effort to get area cities to raise the legal age from 18 to 21 to purchase tobacco products. It's about more than keeping tobacco products and e-cigarettes out of the hands of 18-year-olds.

Jordan Elder, co-chair of Youth with Vision at Park Hill High School, told about 100 people at the Healthy KC news conference at Union Station that younger students often ask older classmates to buy tobacco products for them, particularly e-cigarettes. To be nice, the older students agree.

Bridget McCandless, co-chair of the Healthy KC Commission and president and chief executive of the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, said the addictive power of tobacco products on the teen brain is greater. Getting people hooked at a young age keeps them addicted. She said smoking leads to the premature death of a third of its consumers.

Tobacco 21|KC is an opportunity for cities in the metropolitan area to join nearly 100 other municipalities and Hawaii to make a difference for children and adults. Also, don't worry too much about the effect raising the age will have on stores that sell cigarettes.

Such laws have only resulted in a 2 percent reduction in tobacco product sales. But it makes a big difference in overall public health. Places like Columbia, Mo., which has the law, just has stores card young people who want to purchase tobacco products. I've seen it happen.

It's a simple deterrent, and it works without heavy-handed criminal penalties.

Tobacco 21|KC is no different from Kansas City and other jurisdictions having laws creating smoke-free workplaces. It's good for the overall health of everyone.

Instead of sitting back and waiting for others to act, health-conscience, socially responsible teens in Kansas City should push for the change in the laws where they live. They would show themselves to be a whole lot smarter and more aware than people in my generation were as they celebrated over winning the right to slowly do themselves in.