

Novato youth strive to persuade merchants to ditch alcopops

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Zane Roegiers, 18, of Novato, walked into the manager's office at a Novato store with an outstretched hand.

"Hello," he began. "I'm a student at San Marin High School and would like to talk to you about a resolution the city has passed encouraging merchants to take alcopops off their shelves."

The high school senior is part of a program in which Novato youth visit merchants in the city and suggest they stop offering the popular beverages. Selling for around \$1.45 a container as ready-to-go alcoholic drinks, alcopops marketed under brand names such as Smirnoff Ice and Mike's Hard Lemonade are beverages often brightly packaged and sweetly flavored like soda pop. Working to take them off local shelves can help reduce the temptation to young people to drink, organizers said.

"Alcopops are dangerous because they don't look or taste like alcohol," Roegiers said. "Many of them could be mistaken for an energy drink or soda. They are marketed toward people under the age of 21."

The effort was created by San Rafael-based Alcohol Justice and the Youth Leadership Institute is administering it, led by Novato project coordinator Kiely Hosmon. The visits to local stores began in April and are still ongoing, said Roegiers, who noted that about 10 merchants have received a visit so far.

Already, the teams are succeeding, Roegiers said.

"Paradise Foods has fully decided to take all their alcopops off the shelf and be a teammate to us, the Novato City Council and the Blue Ribbon Coalition," he said, referring to the store on Ignacio Boulevard.

The Novato City Council, Marin County supervisors and San Rafael's City Council have all passed nonbinding resolutions requesting retailers to stop selling the product, at the urging of young people involved in the project. The Blue Ribbon Coalition is another group involved in the effort, as is Healthy Novato.

"Before the visits, I call and make arrangements, so the managers know what to expect," Hosmon said. The project coordinator also does about three months of training with the young people so they are prepared to handle questions, she said.

Teams of two to seven young people go to the stores together to give each other moral support, Roegiers said.

"First we go in there and introduce ourselves and start talking, and the manager will say, 'Oh, I've heard about this,' or 'Oh, no, I don't know what that is,' and we give them our list," Roegiers said, referring to the information-packed flyers the teams give out during their visits.

"Then we explain the dangers of alcopops and why the City Council wants them to work with us to get them off the shelves," Roegiers said.

The young people are recruited from various youth organizations, including the Youth Leadership Institute.

At first, Roegiers said, he was nervous about approaching the merchants.

"Once I got some practice under my belt, it went from being nervous to being excited about doing something to benefit the community," he said.

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