

Lights, Camera, Take Action: Spotlighting Public Health for the Next Generation

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What do zombies, “Salad Man,” and Academy Award-nominated director Gus Van Sant have in common?

They have all played a role in Northwest Health Foundation’s efforts to bring the importance of a fully functioning public health system into the hearts and minds of the people – especially the youth – of Oregon.

One of the foundation’s guiding principles is that “population-based approaches are essential for improving the public’s health.” But while we believe this truth to be self-evident, it is not always evident to the general public, especially in light of increasing attacks on government programs and our shared, common good.

Here in Oregon, we are working hard to change that.

WHAT ABOUT THE YOUTH?

While baby boomers still predominate the health workforce, the younger generations of Americans have at least as much at stake in the success or failure of our public health systems. Young people between the ages of 12 and 30 are the ones who are most likely to take up smoking; who most benefit from education about risky sexual behaviors and good parenting; and who are at most risk of developing diabetes, obesity, and so many other preventable diseases.

Today’s millennials are strikingly different from the youth of previous generations. The current crop is more comfortable than ever with the technology used in our medical care and public health systems.

They are more familiar with diversity in all its forms, and they have a much deeper understanding of the globalized world than their parents and grandparents had 25 and 50 years ago. Today, our youth are able and willing to connect instantly with people and ideas produced anywhere in the world, at any time. And they are doing just that, at all hours of the day. One implication of these trends is that our young people are more comfortable with, and ready for, social change than any previous generation since.

So how are we connecting with these emerging leaders?

First and foremost, we are letting them know that we are listening to them and that we are willing to facilitate the change that they envision.

ENGAGING THROUGH PHOTOS, FACEBOOK, AND MORE

Through our Community Health Priorities (CHP) project, we are now working on our third annual Youth Photo Contest, where we ask students to show us what health looks like through their eyes – and their cameras. What we have heard from them is enlightening

As second-place winner in the 2010 contest, 13-year-old Kasey Truax, wrote in the caption of her photo of brown and white rice grains formed in the shape of a heart, “It’s the small choices in life that can make a big difference.” We found that they also know that these choices are easier for some people than others. One of our 2009 winners, 16-year-old Banlin Garcia told us, “Parents should talk to their kids about smoking, but a lot of the kids who smoke don’t have parents or good relationships with their parents, so something else needs to be done for them.”

They recognize the interconnected nature of ensuring health. Contestant Sarah Jarvis, age 16, wrote in the caption of

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her Oregon waterfall photo, “Everything, and everyone of us, relies on a clean water system to be able to flourish.”

Despite often urgent commitments to social change, so many of these youth will not compromise whimsy and fun. Nora Hobson, age 12, wrote in the caption of her “Salad Man” photo, “Public health starts with healthy eating and we’re saving the world one salad at a time!”

The foundation’s CHP Web site, www.communityhealthpriorities.org, is the launching point for a Facebook page

and Twitter feeds, and it also serves as a point of entry for original content around public health issues. Currently, two public health professors in Oregon require their students to participate in these Web site conversations, and the result has been a rich flow of insight and input.

Our young leaders often demonstrate a level of understanding that is well beyond the “for-or-against” mentality. As one student commented in a conversation about a soda tax:

To artificially increase the price of something we're already artificially reducing through our farm subsidies for corn crops is ridiculous. Instead of paying twice for the low cost of soda, why not tax soda companies for purchasing the corn syrup, or better yet, increase the cost of these nutritionally worthless foods by decreasing the corn subsidies?

Another young person commented on the CHP Web site about the misguided notion of “freedom” in everything American:

If NOTHING is regulated (food, schools, workplaces), or paid for (taxes to fund school PE), and we are “free” to sit around and play videogames and consume junk, then it's no surprise that we're unhealthy. I hope with this new administration and our generation's current state of health that there is a real sea change.

HERE COME THE ZOMBIES...

In order to further stimulate creative ways to talk about the benefits of a fully functioning public health system, Northwest Health Foundation launched a public health video contest in 2010. We spread our message far and wide – to the young, the semi young, and even the not so young. Most people who heeded the call, however, were – you guessed it – young.

“We all enjoy the benefits provided by Oregon’s public health systems and agencies every day, but many of us don’t realize it,” the foundation said in the contest announcement. “We think it’s time to change that. And we need your help. The Challenge: Develop a 30-second public service advertisement (PSA) that creatively demonstrates how our communities benefit from Oregon’s public health system and its county health departments.”

The winners received cash, and the grand prize recipient got something else. Thanks to the generosity of Oregon’s own Gus Van Sant, a feature film director, the first place winner received a personal meeting with the academy-award nominated director.

The video submissions confirmed what we already knew – there are a lot of creative and talented young people in this state, many of whom recognize the value of public health.

Public Health and Zombies, submitted by 24-year-old Anthony Hudson, was the winning video.

A panel of five judges – professionals from the fields of film, video, advertising, and public health – selected the winners. Contest judge Vince Porter, executive director of the

Oregon Office of Film and Television, said about the *Zombies* spot, “It creatively makes the case that public health is ready to respond to unforeseen and unimagined emergencies.”

A vampire-themed video, *Getting Sick Sucks*, won third place, and here the judges were impressed by how much important information was crammed into the 30-second message framed around a vampire and a visitor from a public health department.

TAKING IT TO THE LEGISLATURE

Now that we are connecting with words, photos, and multimedia, and also with public opinion research, Northwest Health Foundation is putting it all together to ask: “What is the public health system we envision for the 21st century?”

The foundation is now developing a proposal that would deepen the appreciation of the value of the public health system within the Oregon Legislature – and the Oregon public. We are embarking on an assessment that identifies priority public health issues and assesses the current Oregon public health system’s capacity to address these issues. This assessment would identify vast areas for improvement and present recommendations for achieving a world-class public health system to a future legislature.

It would also help the Oregon Health Authority articulate a comprehensive “systems” model of the key elements of a world-class public health system for Oregon that engages a vast range of stakeholders beyond public health employees and county commissioners.

In addition to engaging youth, it would engage racial and ethnic minorities and rural populations in defining how local and state health departments can most effectively support and advance their health priorities in a culturally relevant manner.

Finally, we would support the Oregon Health Authority to recommend how to best structure the public health system in the context of state and national health care reform and would outline a financially sustainable approach to a world-class public health system in Oregon.

We can only hope that as the current cohort of young, diverse leaders continues to enter the voting ranks, Oregon will be ready with a system in place to finally see a more equitable and more effective health system for all.

Both of these efforts – the engagement of youth and the assessment of a world-class public health system – are long term endeavors. They require patience, persistence, and commitment to change.

Are not these some of the same qualities required of the best health-related philanthropic organizations?

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