



PHOTO BY MICHAEL KARAS

John Mulligan speaks to Lowell School students about the dangers of smoking.

KICK BUTTS DAY

Students adopt smokers

BY YVONNE M. DARLING
Of Suburbanite

"Dear Uncle Joe, I love you very much. Smoking can make you die early. Please stop smoking."

Point blank, smoking is not only bad for your health it can hurt the people around you.

That was the lesson that students at Lowell Elementary School took home last week.

More than 100 fourth graders participated in a county program called Adopt-a-Smoker sponsored by Communities Against Tobacco.

The program took place March 31, Kick Butts Day, a national project of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

"There are two goals for the program," Rachel Lender, director of Communities Against Tobacco said, referring to the Adopt-a-Smoker program. Lowell School was the first school in the county to participate in the pilot program, she said.

"The goal is to educate young

children before they start to smoke about the dangers of tobacco use. Another goal is to teach kids how addictive tobacco really is."

Students were asked to come to school with the names and addresses of people they care about who smoke. Through a letter writing campaign, they pledged to at least try to get their adopted smoker "smoke-free" by the end of the school year.

With the help of the kids, Lender, who is a Teaneck resident, said, the program aims to give smokers the help they need to quit. The kids will follow the progress of their adoptees as each smoker was asked to keep a journal, she said.

"They will be able to see how many people were able to quit. And for those who couldn't quit, why they couldn't quit and how hard it is to quit. If we get people to quit, we've taught a great lesson on how kids can be empowered to change the life and health of the adults in their lives," she said.

Ellen Rosato Keane, the school's health educator and

nurse, said that fourth grade is not an unusual time for kids themselves to experiment with smoking.

"You want to grab them while they are first becoming interested in their health and give them the self-esteem and confidence to be able to say no," she said.

She said most kids really don't start to experiment with smoking until they hit middle school and become more "savvy" on how to get hold of tobacco products.

"But 9- and 10-year-old kids (the age of most fourth graders) are certainly aware of their environment. It is a good time to instill in them what is healthy and what is not," said Keane.

Already, substance abuse is part of the school district's Community and Learning curriculum. Lender, who provided the fictitious letter to Uncle Joe as an example of the kinds of letters the students wrote, said she would like to see the Adopt-a-Smoker program introduced in other school districts depending on its success in Teaneck.