

# Algoma teens fired up against smoking

Lung association program hopes students can sway peers to quit

By Brian Kelly  
THE SAULT STAR

Fuming mad at cigarettes, Andrea LeBlanc wants to light a fire of awareness to warn other teenagers about tobacco's dangers.

"(Smoking) is still cool because it's so normal," she said. "No one's standing up to make a difference, to make a stand."

The Alexander Henry High School student is one of nine Algoma District teenagers hired in October by Algoma Health Unit as Youth Action Alliance peer leaders.

Their task, for the coming year, is to deliver an anti-smoking message to their peers. They will work, and get paid, for 10 hours a week through to December 2006.

"What we think will get the message across we've learned over the years isn't necessarily the most productive way to reach that population," said Janet Allen, tobacco control program co-ordinator with the area health unit.

"They know their population, the target audience. They have a better understanding of what makes them tick and what will reach them. Hopefully they will have a more successful impact by reaching that population."

LeBlanc, who sees a "good percentage" of students who attend the North-

**'THEY KNOW THEIR POPULATION, THE TARGET AUDIENCE. THEY HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT MAKES THEM TICK AND WHAT WILL REACH THEM.'**

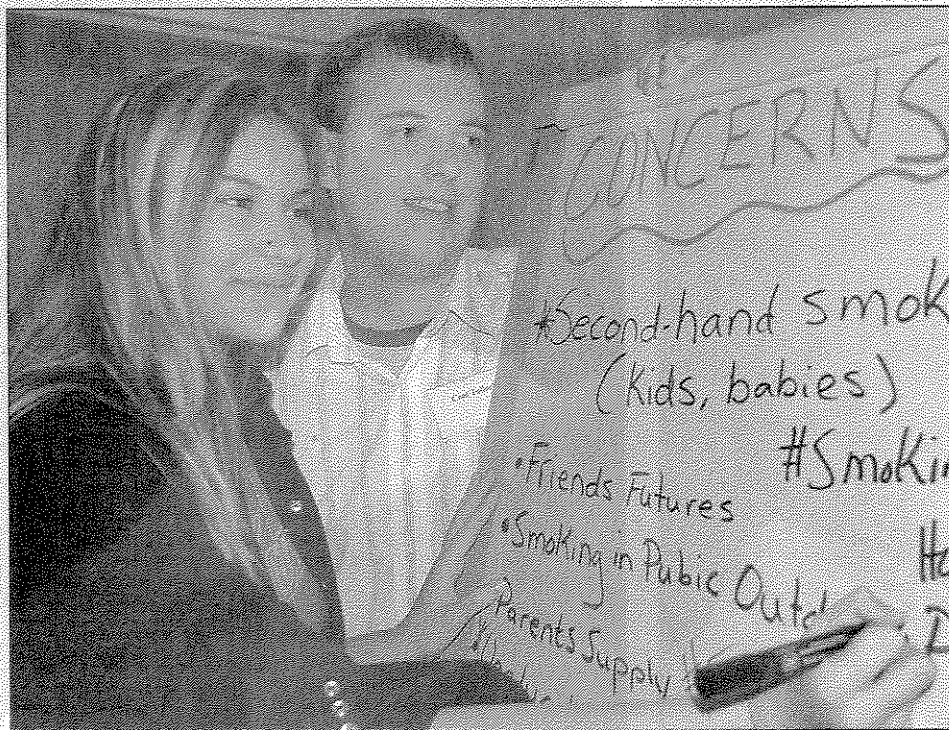
— Janet Allen, tobacco control program co-ordinator, Algoma Health Unit

ern Avenue school lighting up, is eager to get to work. Young people are struggling to butt out, she said.

"They want to quit. They can't," said LeBlanc, 16. "They keep relapsing."

Students in grades 7 to 12 in Northern Ontario are most likely to smoke, according to a study done by Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

The report, *Drug Use Among Ontario*



MARGARET CAMERON-MCQUEEN — SAULT STAR  
PEER LEADER Andrea LeBlanc, 16, of Alexander Henry, plots strategy for the anti-smoking crusade with Cam Tulloch, regional program co-ordinator with the Lung Association, at an action alliance training session in Sault Ste. Marie on the weekend.

*Students 1977-2003, found 24 per cent of students in the North lit up.*

LeBlanc was one of about 30 young people from Algoma and Sudbury to attend a three-day training session that wrapped up Sunday at Algoma's Water Tower Inn.

Cameron Tulloch, an Ontario Lung Association regional program co-ordinator, was among the representatives from the charity's youth advocacy training institute to share tips on subjects such as writing press releases, making presentations and just what a provincial standing committee is and how they can get involved.

"We're trying to give them all the skills and resources that they need to be able to advocate in any way that's going to most effectively suit their community," said Tulloch.

"You don't have an exceptionally large budget. You certainly don't have a budget anywhere comparable to what the tobacco industry has to deliver their message."

Secondary students such as LeBlanc may lack dollars, but their commit-

ment to the no-smoking cause makes them powerful spokespersons, he added.

"It's really, really important that they bring a true authentic voice," Tulloch said.

"They're probably more effective in speaking to everybody because they're going to be able to tell you genuinely what they believe."

Algoma Health Unit received \$110,000 from the Ministry of Health Promotion to fund the program.

The Algoma group is one of 30 to begin in Ontario this year, Tulloch said.

Joining LeBlanc are Gregg Currie (Sault Ste. Marie), Jennifer Lalonde (Wawa), Kayla Cresswell (Wawa), Vanessa Gastaldo (Central Algoma), Kristen Lafromboise (Blind River), Alanah Jensen (Blind River), Carley Ingles (Elliot Lake) and Jessica Rawcliffe (Elliot Lake).

Any other students who want to volunteer to help the peer leaders can call Corina Artuso, the health unit's youth action leader, at 759-6390.