

Car show gives Big Tobacco the red light

Organizers let cigarette marketers know they're not welcome

By Rob Dennis
CORRESPONDENT

Article Launched: 09/06/2008 07:47:29 PM PDT
UNION CITY

Most event organizers are keen to attract sponsors, but members of Project RIDE are telling a particularly well-heeled one to get lost.

Visitors to the group's import car show Saturday could find hip-hop dance contests, face-painting for the kids and, of course, row upon row of tricked-out Hondas, Mitsubishis and Nissans.

What was missing, however, were the tobacco sponsorship and promotions that have become common at similar events around the state.

"This is not an ordinary car show "... it's a statement," said Stella Jun, director of Project RIDE. "This is our community. This is our scene. So tell (the tobacco companies) to back off, and welcome people who love cars."

Organizers say the Union City event, held in the parking lot of the Union City Apostolic Church at Alvarado-Niles Road and Western Avenue, is the first of its kind to prohibit promotion or sponsorship by tobacco companies.

The import car scene sprang up in the late 1980s in Southern California, where enthusiasts began modifying their Japanese compact cars for higher

performance. In the years since, it has grown from subculture to mainstream, attracting a young, mostly male demographic. More than 30 import car shows are held in California every year, each attracting an average of 20,000 attendees, according to Project RIDE.

Tobacco companies target this burgeoning import car culture, luring some by giving away free movie tickets, buying dinners and handing out free cigarettes and promotional items at the car shows, according to the group.

A statewide volunteer network of more than 300 car enthusiasts ages 14 to 34, Project RIDE aims to curb tobacco promotions, free sampling and use among youth, car enthusiasts and Asian-Americans, who still make up the bulk of the import car scene.

"RIDE is not against smokers," said Dr. Wayne Yang, an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, San Diego, and an advisory board member of Project RIDE. "Smoking is a personal decision and, in some ways, a personal burden you've got to bear."

The group is funded by the California Tobacco Control Program, the San Francisco Department of Public Health and the nonprofit Public Health Institute, partially through a \$1 million settlement of a 2001 lawsuit by the state of California against R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., for unlawful distribution of cigarettes and cigarette coupons on public grounds.

"The history of RIDE is really a history of David and Goliath," Yang said. "Goliath spends millions of dollars in marketing trying to push tobacco at this demographic. "... Goliath hands out free tobacco samples to kids illegally at car shows. But today's all about David."

Advertisement



(800) 598-4637

Subscribe today!

www.contracostatimes.com/subscriberservices



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™