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Student Leads Statewide Anti-Tobacco Group Aimed at Changing Public Policy

May 18, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Carrie Otto of Chillicothe, Ill., had only one semester of her college career at Illinois Wesleyan University under her belt this January when she helped create and became president of Ignite Illinois, the state's first branch of a national anti-tobacco organization for young people.

Within its first few months, the chapter grew to 100 members, lobbied legislators, and won a \$10,000 grant from the American Lung Association of Illinois. It has drafted ambitious goals for the coming year, including growth by 1,000 members and continued lobbying of legislators.

Distinct from other anti-tobacco groups that center on education and prevention, Otto said, Ignite works to change public policy. Founded nationally in 2002, Ignite defines itself as a grassroots organization empowering young people to hold the tobacco industry accountable at every level by directing public officials to act responsibly.

Otto discovered her passion for anti-tobacco efforts and honed her leadership skills in high school, while participating in "I Decide" and its successor, "Reality Illinois," a movement involving 13- through 18-year olds with support from the Illinois Department of Public Health. Part of her motivation for founding Ignite Illinois - aimed at youths up to age 24 - was to carry on this passion and allow college-aged peers to be involved.

Otto's work was recently featured in the *Peoria Journal-Star* and lauded during a live interview on WJBC Radio of Bloomington.

"What made me decide to become so involved was (learning) how tobacco companies specifically target teens, even though they're not supposed to, and how they continue to lie to the public" about the health effects of smoking, Otto said. She credits her anti-tobacco lobbying experience with encouraging her to pursue a major in political science.

"Several years ago, I would (have been) much more intimidated to contact a legislator or write a letter to a newspaper about a legislator," said Otto, who completed her freshman year in April. "I would have felt it was not my place. Now, this has educated me that it is my right to voice my opinion and to be sure public officials are voting as we see fit, and are standing up to tobacco companies that are targeting kids" - to give legislators the message "we're not going to put up with this, or with you allowing this to happen."

Lobbying targets include the state's Clean Indoor Act - Home Rule Bill, which would give local municipalities the right to ban smoking in public places, and support for Food and Drug Administration regulation of tobacco. Ignite Illinois will conduct a training workshop in Springfield on May 21, and plans to soon launch a Web site.

Otto is interning this summer with the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids in Washington, D.C.

