



Everything Jersey

In honor of Kick Butts Day, Irvington mentor offers kids cautionary tale

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Noah K. Murray/The Star Ledger

Children from a local program created short scenes and songs about cigarettes in honor of kick butts day. One woman who works with the kids, Jihadah Sharif, quit smoking in 2009 after she was diagnosed with emphysema and doctors said she lost 75 percent of her lung capacity.

IRVINGTON — With about three dozen 6- to 13-year-olds sitting in front of her, Jihadah Sharif asked if they knew she had smoked. Three or four raised their hands, and one boy said he guessed.

But for the most part, the children that 67-year-old Sharif mentors in Irvington have no idea that after 50 years of smoking, she suffers from emphysema.

They don't know that she takes breaks when she walks or that she no longer dances. Instead she invented an alternative to enjoy her favorite pastime since doctors told her she lost 75 percent of her lung capacity.

"I tap my foot and rock a little bit because I love music and I love to dance," said the East Orange resident whose quiet, raspy voice sounds like a stone that's been sandpapered over time.

Sharif, who started smoking as a teen, quit in 2009 after her chest tightened and she was rushed to the hospital. She makes a point of telling everyone who passes her with a cigarette in their hand how horrible the habit is.

"I say, 'Well, if I gave you a plate of rat poisoning would you eat it?'" she said. "And when they shake their heads no, I say, 'Well, lick your lips 'cause that's what you're smoking.'"

Now Sharif shares her newfound passion with the school-age kids — who meet every day in an after-school program in Irvington — even if they don't know her own personal daily battle.

Her children, as Sharif often calls the kids in the Eisenhower Foundation Youth Safe Haven, performed a series of skits in honor of Kick Butts Day last week. One group made up a rap called "Don't Smoke," while another performance featured a father who promised he would quit after discovering his children were smoking.

Toward the end of the performance, Sharif's sister, who also suffers from emphysema, spoke. Zipporah Braswell, 56, of Newark, told the kids "I can't run, I can't dance, I can't laugh."

After Braswell spoke, Sharif took the microphone and said she, too, suffers from emphysema.

"It was frightening," said 11-year-old Brandon Dalambert. "After hearing her speech, it almost made me cry — I will never smoke."

Sharif said that's her goal. According to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, 9,700 New Jersey children under the age of 18 become daily smokers each year. "It should be more inspiring for them not to smoke," she said of her diagnosis. "That's why I brought my sister, so they could see the results of smoking."



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Jihadah Sharif, a volunteer mentor for the Irvington Eisenhower Youth Safe Haven program, quit smoking in 2009 after she was diagnosed with emphysema and doctors said she lost 75 percent of her lung capacity.

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