

Growing Up in Smoke

By DANIELLE FLOOD

IN the vestibule of the Bronxville High School cafeteria, a 16-year-old Bronxville Broncos cheerleader took a long strong drag on a cigarette, blew out a mess of smoke, tugged at her jacket until it covered the big B and bucking-bronco emblem on her uniform, crossed her feet until her brown and white saddle shoes cuddled each other, and giggled. "We're not supposed to smoke in uniform," she said. "It's a school rule; it's the school reputation. And if we do, we're supposed to cover up the emblem. We're not supposed to let a teacher see us smoke in uniform and we're not supposed to smoke during a game."

But out of uniform, 10th-, 11th- and 12th-grade Bronxville students are allowed to smoke in a designated courtyard on school grounds and when the weather is bad in a small area between glass doors leading to the cafeteria.

The rules outlined by the school's principal, Robert Spenik, accent the contradictory nature of smoking on school property. In Bronxville, as in most schools, students are taught that smoking is unhealthy. But older students are permitted to smoke in the cafeteria vestibule because the school administration, Mr. Spenik said, views smoking as "a personal habit and students' personal habits are best policed by the family."

"We do have the right to set the standards and regulations regarding our programs within the school," Mr. Spenik added.

"I think it's contradictory. I think it's wrong. But I think basically we're trying to be fair with the students."

The American Cancer Society said last year that smoking should be banned in schools. The position was taken after announcement of findings that cigarette smoking among teen-age girls had increased substantially over the previous six years, with 27 per cent of girls 13 through 17 years old smoking, nearly as commonly as teen-age boys. Nearly half the girls in the survey said that their schools had special smoker rooms.

The smoking situation at Bronxville is unusual in Westchester. Most high schools in the county prohibit indoor smoking, and therefore the heavy student smoking season begins only as soon as it is warm enough outside to take a smoke break.

"It's like prohibition," said Jack Helfrich, Bronxville's schools superintendent. "When they weren't allowed to have booze, they found it one way or the other. I don't think an adult can encourage or discourage smoking."

"Students have to in their own minds and age live by their own codes. If it's the in thing to smoke, they'll smoke. I assume that it's fairly in for kids to smoke now. I think it's a phase, a matter of identity, being a member of a gang or peer group and it's also a habit."

Bronxville's inside smoking area is small. And in recent weeks, Mr. Spenik said, students have expanded the area to include the cafeteria. The vestibule, which has been available to smokers for a year and a half, is "an experiment that may be ended because students are abusing their privilege by smoking in the cafeteria," he said. "I think the nonsmoker has a lot more rights or just as many at least as the smoker. Parents have complained that their children must leave the area if smokers don't contain their smoking to the vestibule."

The vestibule is a place where you might be able to meet Bruce Elmore on a snowy Friday morning at 10:30, his freckled face fading momentarily behind the smoke he has just exhaled in puffs framed by sparkling tooth braces. He began smoking in the third grade, "but only heavily since sixth grade," and he does not think the existence of an indoor smoking area at Bronxville contributes to his habit. "No matter where I smoke I'm not allowed," he said. He is in ninth grade.

Two windows at Port Chester High



The New York Times/Fred. R. Conrad

Lighting up at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua

School symbolize another double standard involving smoking in schools. One window is clean. The other is a filmy gray. The windows are in the school's teachers' lounges, one for non-smokers and the other for smokers. Students, however, may not smoke indoors.

"It seems to be inconsistent," said Arthur Antin, superintendent of the White Plains school district, where students may not smoke but where teachers are permitted to smoke in lounges. "We ought to be saying nobody should be smoking. Smoking is equally bad for teachers and students, and students have pointed this out to us. The difference however is that teachers are adults and their minds are set. We're not responsible for them."

Dr. Antin said students at White Plains may not smoke on the premises because "in health classes we're teaching students that smoking is dangerous to health and to allow them a place to smoke just seems incongruous and inconsistent. That isn't to say we don't have youngsters who smoke."

"Many families allow children to smoke," noted Edward Hart, principal

of Chappaqua High School. "Everybody's football hero smokes. I think they've glamorized it, the media have. I think they pick the most attractive personality and make it seem as though the personality is enhanced by smoking."

"We had a problem of smoking in the lavatories that created a situation that was detrimental to the overall cleanliness in the school," Mr. Hart said. "There was a lot of hassling, students were suspended, and it was

sort of irritating for all concerned. So we used a sort of pragmatic solution."

Students at Chappaqua are permitted to smoke in a defined outside area, so that the butts are localized.

"The alternative to a smoking area is intense patrolling by teachers of the lavatories—or the hiring of aides and matrons, and I think that's a rather expensive solution to the problem," he said.

Danielle Flood is a former reporter for The New Rochelle Standard-Star.

The New York Times

Published: March 27, 1977

Copyright © The New York Times