

Sacred Heart University

From the Selected Works of Anna E. Greer

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Student Brianna Castrogivanni addresses the Bridgeport City Council about the smoking ban.

At right, a Bridgeport park littered with cigarette butts.

Anna E. Greer, associate professor of exercise science in Sacred Heart University's College of Health Professions, along with several of her students, recently celebrated a long-awaited victory. On October 5, the Bridgeport City Council voted to ban smoking on beaches, playgrounds and sports fields in all Bridgeport parks, following a campaign led by Greer's 2014 Health Promotion Planning and Evaluation class.

Greer has established close ties with the city through her research on Bridgeport's public parks, playgrounds and trails and her affiliation with Sacred Heart's Center for Community Health and Wellness, which collaborates with community partners to address unmet health needs. Many students in the College of Health Professions, across majors and classes, have been instrumental in helping Greer to carry out her studies.

"My area of expertise is policy and environmental supports for active living. I've been focusing here in Bridgeport on promoting physical activity through parks and outdoor spaces," said Greer, adding that many city residents face obstacles in their efforts to engage in regular physical activity. "My work is around how to make that easier."

It took a year and a half of hard work to put all the pieces for the smoking ban in place. The effort began in the summer of 2013 when Greer worked with Bridgeport residents, using the "Community Stakeholder Park Audit tool," to assess the condition of the city's neighborhood parks. The goal was to determine whether the best-kept parks were located in neighborhoods with the highest incomes and whether the process of auditing the parks would empower people to use them more. Although there was a perception that poorly kept parks were concentrated in low-income neighborhoods, the research revealed that the best and worst parks "were equitably distributed" across the city, Greer said. The study also indicated that the audit did, in fact, raise interest in the parks.

"One of the findings was that there were cigarette butts all over the parks, and people were concerned because their kids and pets were putting them in their mouths," said Greer. "Out of that grew another

project in the spring of 2014. As a class, we initiated this effort to have a smoking ban in Bridgeport parks.” The project gave students a perfect opportunity to apply lessons in research and health advocacy outside the classroom to help the community.

The 15 students in the class mobilized to create an online petition and Facebook page, took pictures and researched information about second-hand smoke. They even collected hundreds of cigarette butts at the parks to present as a visual aid at public hearings. Council member Susan Brannelly became a key ally in helping the students navigate the lengthy approval process and regroup after setbacks.

Many of the students from the class have since graduated, but five of them, returned to Sacred Heart to pursue master’s degrees in exercise science and nutrition and stayed involved. Two of them are from Bridgeport and spoke before the City Council vote in support of the smoking ban. Although the ban does not restrict smoking throughout the parks as the class had sought, the students were satisfied with the final outcome as it is a step in the right direction.

“There had to be some compromise,” Greer noted.