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PM-Billboard Whitewash  
Vandalism Heats up Conflict over Inner-City Tobacco and Alcohol  
By CLIFF EDWARDS=  
Associated Press Writer=

CHICAGO (AP) An advertiser threatened to prosecute a paint brush-wielding "magician" who made three inner-city ads for booze and cigarettes disappear under a coat of white paint.

The whitewasher, who uses the pseudonym Mandrake after a comic strip magician and described himself as a 54-year-old black professional, said he was conducting a one-man civil disobedience campaign to erase a "blight on the community."

"I have seen over the past two years a disproportionate amount of advertising in the black and Hispanic community," said Mandrake, in a telephone interview in which he refused to give his real name. "I believe it was time for us to stand up and fight back."

Tobacco and liquor producers were alarmed by the actions of Mandrake, whose painting of three South Side billboards in broad daylight last week followed a much-publicized outcry over a tobacco company's plan to target blacks in marketing a new brand of cigarettes.

"He's obviously vandalizing private property," said Geoff Obrzut, a spokesman for Patrick Media, whose billboard was covered.

A police report was filed, Obrzut said, and "we would be willing to prosecute if he's caught."

"I'm a firm believer in the Constitution and believe the law was broken," Mandrake conceded. "But at the same time, there is a moral obligation, a right, that must be addressed."

Gary Miller, a spokesman for the American Tobacco Institute in Washington, D.C., said billboards had no effect on young people, who as a group become smokers primarily because of peer pressures and parental influence.

Janet Flynn of the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, echoed Miller's remarks: "We restrict our advertising to responsible adult customers."

A lively debate over the ethics of aiming tobacco and alcohol ads at minorities came to a head last week when U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan attacked an R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. plan to test-market a new cigarette, Uptown, in Philadelphia starting Feb. 5.

While cigarette advertising already is targeted at minorities, Uptown apparently was the first brand to be created, named and marketed specifically for blacks.

R.J. Reynolds shelved its plans, but Sullivan said he would continue to campaign against such marketing, including products aimed at women.

Consumer groups, alarmed at the high rates of smoking and drinking-related illnesses among inner-city minorities, say the producers have an obligation not to aim dangerous products at these groups.

Industry representatives say their advertising strategies

are protected by the First Amendment and contend that people make their own decision about whether to light up or take a drink.

The lung cancer rate has increased four times faster among blacks than among whites during the past 30 years, according to reports from the American Lung Association and the National Cancer Institute.

A 1987 study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington-based health advocacy group, found that black men have a 70 percent higher death rate from cirrhosis of liver than whites.

The group contends that children are being encouraged by the billboard ads.

"Children on the way to school and back home or even at recess get the message that the way to be happy, glamorous, or athletic is to smoke and-or drink," one publication by the center said.

Obrzut said that while 50 percent of billboard advertising does occur in the inner city, only 16 percent of the city's 2,500 ads are alcohol- or tobacco-related.

State Sen. Miguel Del Valle of Chicago has proposed legislation to ban the alcohol and cigarette ads within about two blocks of schools. That and even stronger measures are to be reviewed by a governor's task force.

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AM-IL--Minorities-Billboards

Vandalism Heats Up Conflict over Inner-City Tobacco and Alcohol Ads

By CLIFF EDWARDS=

Associated Press Writer=

CHICAGO (AP) The "magician" behind the disappearance of several billboards under a coat of white paint said Wednesday he's fed up with the glamorous ads touting tobacco and alcohol in inner-city neighborhoods.

The painter, who has taken the pseudonym Mandrake after a comic strip magician, said billboard ads in predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods on the South Side are aimed at young people and promote dangerous vices.

Mandrake, a 54-year-old black professional who declined to give his real name, said he has taken a paint brush to billboards three times in broad daylight because the ads corrupt young people.

"I have seen over the past two years a disproportionate amount of advertising in the black and Hispanic community," he said. "I believe it was time for us to stand up and fight back."

Added the painter, "I'm a firm believer in the Constitution and believe the law was broken ... but at the same time, there is a moral obligation, a right, that must be addressed."

But Geoff Obrzut, a spokesman for Patrick Media, a national billboard company, called the acts "pure vandalism" and said he filed a police report Wednesday.