

Metro

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The Rev. Jesse Brown (left) and Reginald Hart with a cigarette billboard draped in protest of tobacco firms' marketing efforts in the black community. A dozen anti-smoking activists showed up for the protest in Strawberry Mansion yesterday. Story and another picture: **B3**.

Anti-smoking activists protest the targeting of blacks by the tobacco industry.

A billboard is draped in mourning

By Michael Sokolove
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The handsome young black man smiled down on Strawberry Mansion from a billboard plastered to the side of a vacant building. He held a cigarette in his right hand, and he looked happy and prosperous, above it all.

Yesterday, the Rev. Jesse Brown climbed a rickety wooden ladder and nailed black fabric over the billboard that advertised Kool cigarettes at 29th Street and Ridge Avenue. Then Pastor Brown and about a dozen other anti-smoking activists held a service to mourn the victims of lung cancer and other smoking-related diseases.

Draping the billboard, Pastor Brown acknowledged, was just one small, symbolic act against the tobacco industry, which he said knows only the color of money but targets the African American community.

"We're not going to tolerate any more misery. We don't need any more misery," said Pastor Brown, of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, at 30th and Diamond.

By misery, Pastor Brown meant not only smoking-related illness, but also many other destructive forces afflicting the inner city. The neighborhood around the billboard, on the edge of Fairmount Park, is a mix of churches and bars, beauty salons and hardware stores, well-kept brownstones and boarded-up brownstones and vacant lot after vacant lot, some strewn with litter and others planted with flowers and vegetables.

In such a neighborhood, where good and evil are in such close combat, the cigarette ads are viewed by many as a particular affront — insult to injury.

But one neighborhood man on the outskirts of yesterday's event chided the anti-smoking activists for choosing a target he deemed too trivial. "Cigarettes is not where we should be at right now," shouted Stanley Warren, 41, as the group marched toward the billboard. "Cocaine. Bullets and cocaine. Let's do something about that! Cigarettes are legal."

African Americans smoke in



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The Rev. Jesse Brown (left) and Stephen Walker prepare to drape the cigarette billboard. The protest in North Philadelphia was keyed to World No Tobacco Day, sponsored by the World Health Organization.

greater percentages, and die from lung cancer in greater percentages, than whites, according to Deputy City Health Commissioner Lawrence Robinson. The annual death rate for lung cancer is 401 per 100,000 for African Americans and 380 per 100,000 for whites, said Robinson, who watched as the billboard was draped in black.

There are about 800 small billboards on the side of buildings in Philadelphia — called "eight-sheets" in the billboard trade — and about 25 percent of them advertise cigarettes, according to Frank Antico, who regulates billboards for the city Department of Licenses and Inspections. Many black neighborhoods are plastered with eight-sheets every couple of blocks.

Pastor Brown yesterday said the tobacco industry has a "plan to take over our community with their prod-

uct," and he framed the battle as a fight against cigarette advertising in the inner city as one of empowerment. Even smoking cessation programs, Pastor Brown said, will soon be "nuanced" for African Americans. A program with the backing of the American Cancer Society will be called Pathways to Freedom.

The protest yesterday was part of World No Tobacco Day, sponsored by the World Health Organization. In Philadelphia, it was organized by a coalition of groups that has been together since 1990, when R.J. Reynolds tried to test-market a new menthol cigarette called Uptown in the city's black community. The grassroots protest by the Uptown Coalition made it so uncomfortable for R.J. Reynolds that the tobacco giant pulled out.

Pastor Brown, president of the Black Clergy of Philadelphia and Vi-

city, last year "blackwashed" a cigarette billboard and was arrested and briefly held at the 22d Police District.

Yesterday, after he nailed the black fabric over the billboard, a stiff breeze blew it off. He went back up the ladder after the memorial service and drove more nails into it. Fifteen minutes later the fabric had blown off, and the handsome young man was again smiling down on Strawberry Mansion.

