



The John Slade NJ Activist of the Year Award Given to Two Recipients: Jim O'Brien and Janis Mayer-Obermeier

By Bernice Order-Connors, LCSW, CADC

This year's John Slade NJ Activist of the Year Award was presented at the Tobacco Dependence Program's national conference on September 29th, 2005 at the Hyatt Regency in New Brunswick. This award, given annually, seeks to commemorate and remember the many achievements of Dr. John Slade and seeks to honor an individual, who, like Dr. Slade, possesses an advocate's spirit and demonstrates leadership and/or achievement in the field of tobacco control.

This year, the review committee for the John Slade award faced a tremendous challenge, when two nominees emerged who both are advocates and leaders in NJ. Ultimately, the committee found that tobacco control in NJ would not wear the face it has today without either advocate and chose to honor both Ms. Janis Mayer Obermeier, (Manager of Youth and School Programs, New Jersey State, Department of Health and Senior Services) and Mr. Jim O'Brien, (Executive Director of the Addiction Treatment Providers of New Jersey). Both have contributed so richly to reducing tobacco use in New Jersey.

Janis Mayer-Obermeier

In the letters nominating Ms Janis Mayer-Obermeier, she is described by colleagues as, "a force in the Youth advocacy anti-tobacco movement, a woman who transformed the Youth and Schools unit at the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services into a vital force in the lives of New Jersey's youth, with a crystal clear vision for a youth empowerment movement, which would help to change the social norms of tobacco in New Jersey. She clearly respects youth and the energy and creativeness they possess. She never ceases to believe that one person can make a difference and shares this with the Youth she works with. Janis is not only an advocate for prevention of tobacco use, but believes in helping those youth who are already addicted to nicotine."

"Janis' passion is most visible through the programs that she has created through her work at NJDHSS: REBEL 2, NJ's middle school youth prevention program designed to teach students refusal skills and life skills; REBEL, NJ's state-wide, tobacco prevention movement for high school students that empowers, educates, and activates over 5,000 NJ youth to reject tobacco use and make healthy lifestyle decisions; and REBEL U, NJ's college-age mentorship and empowerment program established and chartered on nine NJ campuses. In addition, each year, with the aid of the Media and Communications Unit, Janis continues to implement statewide events that may draw significant media attention to tobacco control efforts in the state. These events include the Annual Statewide REBEL Summit (hosting over 1,000 high school students) and the Annual Statewide REBEL Tobacco Learning Institute- a multi-day, overnight, intensive tobacco education and training for NJ REBEL members; a first of its kind in the nation.

Before coming to the State, Janis served as New Jersey's first Student Assistance Counselor. Because of her enthusiasm for helping youth deal with addiction issues, Janis made sure that the Youth component of the Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program included cessation programs. It is her vision not only to inspire a generation of youth to not begin smoking, but to support those who already are addicted in their efforts to stop." Her contributions in Tobacco education, advocacy, and cessation are improving New Jersey's Youth quality of life.

Janis has inspired and continues to inspire not only the youth of these various programs, but everyone she comes in contact with, nationwide. Her work as a motivational speaker only enhances her ability to ignite passion among all of those with whom she associates."

Jim O'Brien

It is hard to imagine that tobacco treatment in the addiction treatment community would be where it is today without the leadership and commitment that Jim O'Brien has brought to the field both as a director of a treatment program and as Director of Addiction Treatment Providers. Jim is the voice of addiction treatment in New Jersey.

Jim has been instrumental in making tobacco treatment accessible to addiction treatment providers throughout the addiction treatment system. When the NJ CTCP de-funded its initiatives in the NJ addictions treatment community, (which were considered a national model program), Jim found funding to continue these initiatives and found ways to not only maintain the existing level of services but to increase them. Jim found the means to continue making the training and consultancy services available. When funding cuts by the NJ CTCP threatened to cut the free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) that had been made available to the residential programs, Jim went to bat at the State to save NJ's groundbreaking program. Not only was funding restored for the NRT, but the program was also expanded to include both inpatient and outpatient programs. He also pushed for recognition of the fact that treatment facility staff use tobacco at higher rates and are also in need of assistance for quitting.

In a quiet way, Jim has always made sure to include tobacco into addiction treatment. Whether it was inviting the Tobacco Dependence Program to have a booth at the annual ATP conference or the presence of a tobacco plenary speaker at the conference, or purchasing resources such as posters for providers, tobacco issues were always brought to the forefront as a topic of concern for addiction treatment providers. When ATP opened its first 2-week Addictions College this past year, Jim was sure to have a 6-hour tobacco component included in the curriculum. His commitment to seeing that addictions professionals are properly trained in the management of tobacco and nicotine dependence is clearly present.

There is real leadership and commitment from Jim O'Brien to see that NJ continues to bring state of the art addiction treatment that includes the treatment of tobacco to clients who enter the addiction treatment system."

New Jersey has benefited greatly from the contributions of both Jim O'Brien and Janis Mayer-Obermeier, two advocates who have challenged the norms of tobacco use in two very different and vulnerable populations in our State. We are pleased to have the opportunity to acknowledge the work of Jim O'Brien and Janis Mayer-Obermeier in awarding them the John Slade NJ Activist of the Year Award.