

Bridging the Cultural Divide: A Kern County Success Story



Nsele makes friends easily at Whiskey Flats Days encampment.

Nsele Nsuangani, the Project Director of Kern County's Tobacco Education Program, has had a lot of success getting tobacco control policies passed in his jurisdiction. Since 2006, Nsele's efforts have resulted in tobacco retail licensing policies being adopted in the unincorporated area of Kern County as well as in five cities. In an attempt to identify the secrets to his success despite being a cultural "outsider", we asked him about how he came to the United States, the culture in Kern County, and how he works with the community to get tobacco control policies passed.

From the Congo to Kern County

Nsele was born and raised in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the city of Kinshasa. "In the late 1980s I was going to university to get my degree," Nsele explains. "At that time, there was so much political oppression in Congo. I was politically active at the university, asking for change in the regime." As a result of speaking out, he got into trouble and was jailed.



He notes, "Things we take for granted here [in the US, like free speech], get you into trouble there. After being released, I decided to find a way out of Congo -- and I did. And, that's how I came to the United States."

He arrived in 1990 to study English at the International English Institute in Fresno, a prerequisite to acceptance at an American college or university. "The easiest way for me to integrate, because I spoke French, was to watch Hispanic television stations and listen to Hispanic music on the radio. There is a lot of similarity [between the two languages] and it helped me," he describes in his heavy accent.

"By going to school and working, by meeting a lot of different people, and by being exposed to a lot of different cultures in Fresno County," Nsele declares, "I learned the American way of life." In terms of his college education though, "I had to start over." Ultimately, he earned both a Bachelor's and Master's degree from Fresno State University in Public Health. And from there, Nsele was offered the position of Project Director of Kern County's Tobacco Control Program in 2004. Since then he has been working to promote tobacco retail licensing policies and a countywide secondhand smoke ordinance.

The Culture of Kern County



Located in the southern portion of the Central Valley, Kern County is a major agricultural and energy producer. Politically, "it is predominantly Republican and conservative," according to Nsele. The population is primarily white (38.6% non-Hispanic and 49.2% Hispanic) plus another 12.2% other races (US Census 2010). Nsele notes, "There aren't too many black people."

But in the bigger cities, there is a variety of people from different backgrounds and cultures. "Bakersfield itself has a mixture of people: Hispanics from South America and Mexico, Asians, Filipinos, Hindus . . . people from all over the world." For this reason, "people don't treat me differently," he exclaims. "They are welcoming and curious toward me. They ask,

'Where is your accent from?' " Even in the eastern part of the county where a more rural, "cowboy" culture is predominant, Nsele reports, "people are welcoming and positive."

Working within the Community

Despite the difference in culture between the eastern and western parts of the county, Nsele's approach to getting tobacco control policies passed is the same: "I work within the community and find someone...that knows the people really well. I work through them."



He finds interested community members through educational presentations, prepares them to be spokespersons, and provides the logistical support related to getting on a county board or city council agenda and making a presentation.

"I let the community member take the lead," he explains, "and if questions come up and they need a public health response, that's when myself or someone else from public health can provide the answers. We always take the back

seat and let the community do the talking. We empower the local people."

When it comes to making his case before policymakers, Nsele isn't shy. "Going to the city council for me . . . I am comfortable with it, compared to what I went through [in Congo]," he affirms. "I am not fearful giving my opinion; [here in the US] I have rights." However, Nsele adds that the key is to "be a good listener, to listen to how people are unique and to be respectful of other people's way of life." This will help you find an appropriate way to approach policymakers.

Most of the time he finds that, "Once you share information with policymakers, once you give them the facts, they get it." And that, is the key to Nsele's success in getting half of the jurisdictions in his county to adopt tobacco retail licensing policies!

Images from: Nsele Nsuagani, abdicate.net, Richard Thornton and Shutterstock.com