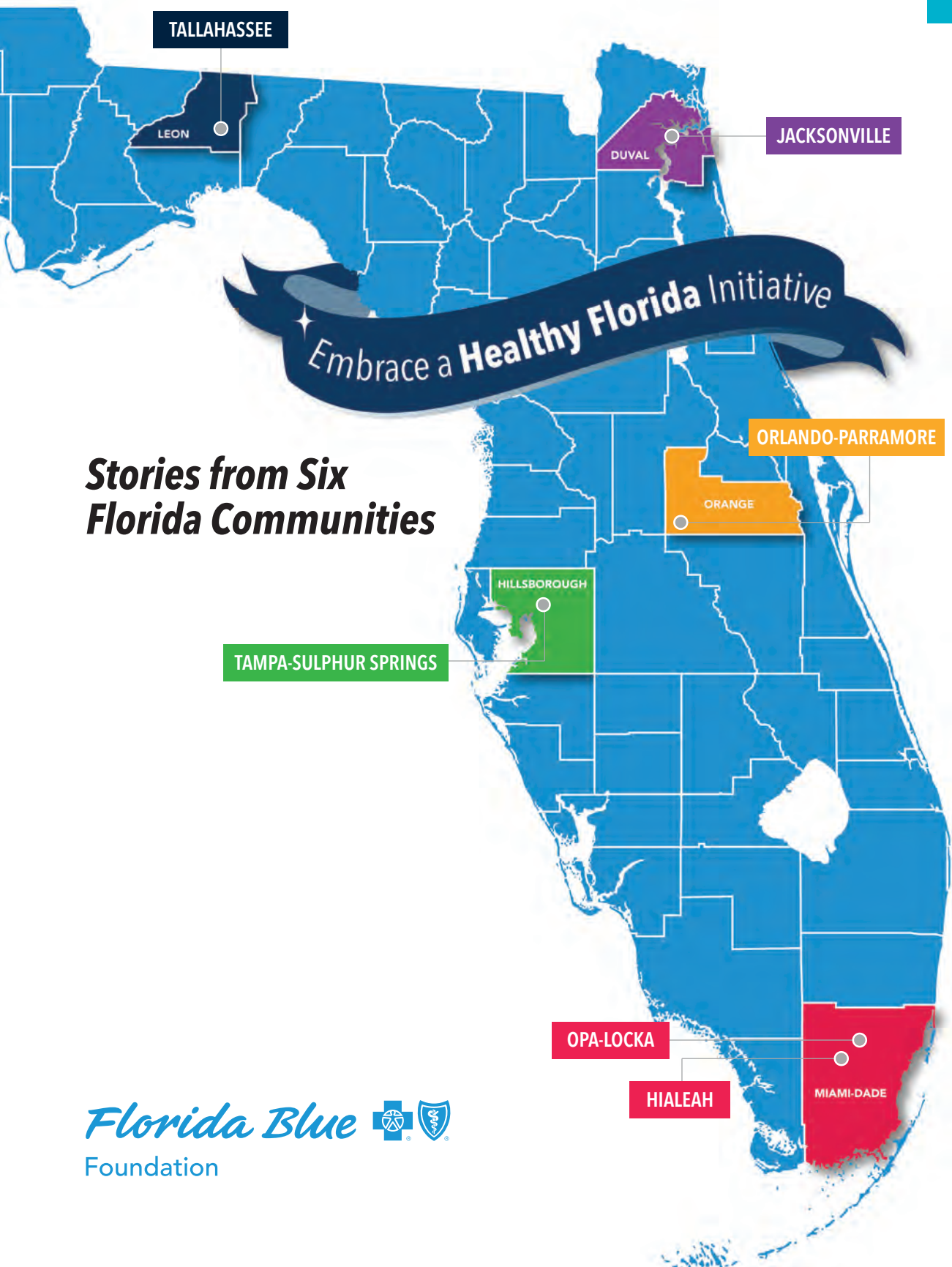


# *Stories from Six Florida Communities*

Florida Blue Foundation

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# Embrace a Healthy Florida Initiative
*Stories from Six Florida Communities*

Florida Blue Foundation
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Florida Blue Foundation is a private corporate foundation whose mission is to help people and communities achieve better health through thought leadership and strategic grant making.



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# Introduction

***The issue of childhood obesity is one that goes beyond individual children. It affects the health of families, communities, and the current and future health of the state.***

Unfortunately, the solution isn't as easy as moving more and eating less. In 2007, approximately 32 percent of Florida children and youth ages 10-17 years were overweight or obese, according to the National Survey of Children's Health. And the number was even higher among low-income and minority populations.

Embrace a Healthy Florida, an initiative of the Florida Blue Foundation, was designed to remove the barriers that stand between children, healthy food choices and physical activity. It offered resources and funding to six nonprofit organizations to be the catalyst to engage the communities and develop partnerships/collaborations to begin to address sustainable solutions for the causes and prevention of childhood obesity.

Created in 2008, the evidence-based, multi-sector initiative used community engagement and partnerships to make long-term, positive changes in childhood and family health in Florida. More than $15 million was invested over the seven-year initiative, making it the largest single investment ever made by the Florida Blue Foundation.

Before the initiative was funded, the Foundation held a series of town hall meetings in communities across the state to hear their views, gather information and, hopefully, develop future community partners. The whole community and nonprofits were invited to discuss the broad concept, as well as other funders and government agencies. The intent was to select the six communities of interest and, when selected, use the "bottom-up approach" to design the initiative in the selected communities. The "bottom-up approach" meant that the chosen communities would engage with the partners/stakeholders in each community to design the best approach to attack childhood obesity.

The Foundation did not prescribe a specific model, but rather listened to the communities and worked with them as they created the different blueprints in each community. The Foundation recognized that this was a new paradigm that is rarely, if ever, used by funders to launch a new initiative. Normally funders establish the

criteria and programs and then post it for the communities to respond to with what they think the needs and issues are to be addressed. This latter process is easier, less time consuming, safe and controlled by the funder.

The Florida Blue Foundation chose to not use the above process, but rather listened to the communities and allowed them to create strategies that they knew would work and be sustained in their given communities long past the Foundation's investments. Just as there is no single cause of childhood obesity, there is also no single solution. That is why Embrace a Healthy Florida worked to address a variety of factors – across the state in different communities – that impact children's health. The Foundation believed that we needed to strategically collaborate with the communities to engage in meaningful childhood obesity prevention activities and programs. Out of this process we believed that we would build community capacity, create emerging leaders grounded in community change and the Foundation would be able to measure success in the six communities and for the state.

The seven success strategies below were designed around a set of established and agreed upon metrics designed to evaluate the outcomes and impacts of the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative in each community:

1. Targeting evidence-based interventions with at-risk communities and low-income children
2. Increasing access to healthy foods
3. Promoting changes in parenting and families
4. Promoting changes in child care or school settings
5. Promoting changes in the environment
6. Addressing marketing and advertising practices
7. Addressing health care providers and systems

To implement the work in the six communities, the six respected organizations were identified to lead the work under this Initiative. The chosen Lead Organizations were as follows:

1. Hialeah in Miami-Dade County: Hialeah Healthy Families operated by the City of Hialeah, Education & Community Services Department

2. Jacksonville in Duval County: Healthy Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition, operated by the Florida Department of Health in Duval County

3. Opa-locka in Miami-Dade County: Building a Healthy Community Opa-locka Childhood Obesity Prevention Project, operated by War on Poverty-Florida

4. Orlando/Parramore in Orlando/Orange County: Building a Healthy Parramore and ROCK (Reduce Obesity in Central Florida Kids) operated by the Health Council of East Central Florida

5. Sulphur Springs in Tampa/Hillsborough County: Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids, operated by the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA

6. Tallahassee in Leon County: Tallahassee Childhood Obesity Prevention Education Coalition (COPE), a collaboration/partnership operated by Florida A&M University, Florida State University, Florida Family Network, and the Greater Frenchtown Revitalization Council

The Lead Organizations received funding from the Florida Blue Foundation to develop and manage the community "Call to Action Plans;" create and manage the community coalitions/partnerships; and implement the programs, approaches and activities in accordance with their Childhood Obesity Call to Action community plans.

We brought the Lead Organizations together frequently to create a learning community. They built their own statewide coalition while leading one in their own community, learning from each other as they went about the business of making children, families and their communities healthier.

In addition, the Foundation felt that it was important to build the leadership and capabilities of the Lead Organizations and the coalitions by teaching them grant making skills. We worked with them as they developed grant making guidelines and requests for proposals, conducted the proposal review process, and made the funding decisions on mini-grants to nonprofit organizations in each community. As a result, many of the Lead Organizations' staff have been called upon to be proposal reviewers for state, local and some national organizations/governments.

The six communities documented that this initiative made a difference in the communities. A few of their successes were:

- More than 329,000 youth and adults participated in culturally sensitive healthy eating and active living programs in the six communities
- In areas designated as "food deserts," 425 community and school gardens were created
- Corner markets were renovated to increase access to and promote healthy food choices in two communities
- Nutrition and physical activity training programs were created in all six communities
- Sugary drinks were removed from child care centers and after school programs in all six communities
- Physical activity was increased in more than 200 child care centers, schools and after school programs in all six communities
- Farmers markets opened in five communities, including two mobile units
- Two communities changed bus routes to allow access to a farmers market
- Communities became safer and more livable
    - Signaled crosswalks were created in three communities
    - Trash, overgrown shrubbery, broken sidewalks were removed or repaired in three communities
    - Playgrounds were lighted, renovated and built in two communities
    - Walking school buses were created in one community
- More than $4.5 million was leveraged beyond the Foundation's funding
- A total of 679 unduplicated working partnerships/collaborations with community organizations, universities, churches, school districts, child care centers, parents and others were created that engaged community partners in diverse ways to increase awareness of childhood obesity issues, needs and solutions. Many of the partnerships/collaborations continue to sustain the initiative past Foundation funding.

The Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative ended in June 2015. However, the Foundation and the six communities worked together to make sure the successes and the outcomes would continue long past the ending of Foundation funding. The Foundation asked each community to decide what they could sustain. We called this component of the initiative "legacy" grants. Each community came up with their legacy ideas, the Foundation funded or matched funding from other sources, and all six of the communities are still hard at work continuing to make a difference in combating childhood obesity.

In addition to the community engagement grants to the six communities, 26 promising practices and applied research grants were funded across Florida to address policy, nutrition, education and awareness as they relate to childhood wellness. The list appears later in this publication. A large percentage of their research and outcomes were used under the initiative.

The communities taught the Foundation a lot about the value of allowing them to be the masters of their fate, understanding how their leadership works and, truly, how best to engage them in an effort where they become the leaders.

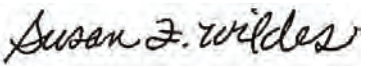
The Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative stories from the six communities you are about to read were reported through a series of interviews conducted by Mary Kress Littlepage, a freelance writer/consultant. Our special thanks go out to Mary for capturing these great stories from the six communities.

Should you want more detailed information about the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, the six communities, or the Lead Organizations, the contact information is provided under the Organizations chapter later in the book.

We hope you enjoy reading these real stories from the voices of individuals from the six communities.

**Susan B. Towler**
*Vice President*

**Velma Monteiro-Tribble**
*Director, Grants and Programs*



**Susan F. Wildes**
*Senior Program Manager; Initiative Lead*

*Jeffrey Lagomacini, Marla Alpizar, Maria Toca and Elizabeth Miro of the City of Hialeah, Education & Community Services Department, the Lead Organization in Hialeah, Miami-Dade County*

# Hialeah

## *Respecting Tradition While Creating Change*

***Todos las maneras conducen a Hialeah.***

"All ways lead to Hialeah," was one of this South Florida city's earliest slogans, and the saying has rung true for Hispanic immigrants for more than 50 years. From the wave of Cubans fleeing the Castro regime in the 1950s to the influx of a melting pot of Caribbean immigrants today, Hialeah has provided a welcoming home.

Ninety-four percent of Hialeah's residents today are Hispanic. The city has the largest concentration of Cuban immigrants in the United States. It is a thoroughly bilingual community, from signage to conversation to grocery stores: the city is home to three Publix *Sabor* (flavor) stores, which cater to the Hispanic clientele.

While Hialeah is a community with character and charm, it also is a community with significant health challenges. It is estimated that 46 percent of the children in Hialeah are overweight, significantly above the 32 percent national average; 27 percent are estimated to be obese.

Since 2010, the City of Hialeah, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, has waged a multi-faceted battle against childhood obesity, engaging an array of community partners. Led by the Hialeah Healthy Families coalition, the community now has in place a network of resources equipped to positively influence the health habits of residents of all ages.

**Strong Community, Strong City**

Hialeah was first incorporated in 1925, coincidental with the founding of the Hialeah Park Racetrack, a venue for Thoroughbred racing famous for its resident flamingos (today it is on the National Register of Historic Places). While some say Hialeah was intended as a playground for the elite, it became an enclave for Hispanics, beginning with the Castro-driven Cuban exile of the 1950s-60s, continuing through the Mariel boatlift in the 1980s and into the current century as waves of Caribbeans seek economic opportunity. Hialeah today is both homogenous and diverse, reflecting the many different faces of the Hispanic world.

Hialeah's 235,000 residents make the city one of the largest in Florida. Located adjacent to the city of Miami in Miami-Dade County, Hialeah is not a wealthy community – median household income is $29,961, well below the state average $46,956. Homes are modest and neighborhoods have a solid "working class" feel.

Hialeah has its own city government, which residents are quick to note is a "full-service" government, providing all municipal services except courts. An extensive network of staffed parks provides recreational opportunities; the parks also serve as anchor sites for community services such as branch libraries, senior centers, after-school programs or early child care centers. The park system includes seven aquatic centers and two tennis centers. City news and information is broadcast on the city's television station – Hialeah TV 77.

In 2010, then-mayor Julio Robaina recognized the challenges facing Hialeah's children because of the threat of childhood obesity. "But we were focused mainly on the exercise side of the equation," said Jeffrey Lagomacini, with the City Department of Education and Community Services. "We were thinking about getting people out walking and exercising. We weren't thinking about education."

When the Florida Blue Foundation approached Robaina about participating in the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative to combat childhood obesity, he was quick to engage, saying "this is a concern for our children's health that cannot go unattended."

In a somewhat unconventional move, the City of Hialeah took the lead on the initiative, anchoring it in the Education and Community Services Department.

"It helped us to reach out to the community and to bring them in," said Maria Toca, a supervisor with the city Department of Education and Community Services.

**Hialeah's Challenge**

Children in communities across the country face the threat of childhood obesity, but those in Hialeah are especially at risk.

The traditional Hispanic diet is rich in fatty, starchy foods. Rice, beans, plantains and bread are staples, as are fatty meats.

In addition, Hispanic culture celebrates an ample figure. "Gordito (chubby) is good," said Karina Pavone, continuing education specialist at Miami-Dade College's Hialeah campus. In a community of hardworking adults, grandmothers often are the primary cooks for the family, and a good "abuella" loves to see the children eat. "I have to say, 'Mom, no!'" Pavone said, recounting how her mother tends to feed her children.

While Hialeah is far from being a food desert, the income status of its residents can be a barrier to healthy eating. Those on a limited income seek calorie-dense foods that will fill up the family; those may not be the healthiest choices. And for those struggling to make ends meet, the focus often is simply on putting food on the table, with little time or energy to focus on whether it is the right food.

## Hialeah Healthy Families

**Environment**

Expand active living and sports programming, particularly for underserved populations

Increase access to healthy foods in vending and concessions at parks, schools and community sites

Plan and develop community gardens

Explore potential for city farmers market

**School Involvement**

Integrate nutrition education with academics

Increase opportunities for physical activity at school

Expand BMI screening for children

Increase healthy food offerings in schools and child care centers

Provide guidance and resources for parents to support healthy eating at home

**Family Engagement**

Improve parent education and understanding of healthy eating and active living principles

Improve parent notification of BMI screening results

Reduce children's screen time and fast food consumption

Encourage primary care health professionals to work more effectively with parents on obesity prevention

**Social Marketing and Community Outreach**

Develop a common obesity prevention message in Spanish and English

Distribute information through traditional and social media and printed materials

Partner with local vendors, markets, nutritionists, chefs and others to promote healthy eating

Magnifying work of community organizations through cross-promotion

Finally, new immigrants may face language and culture barriers that make it more difficult to read nutrition labels and learn about the importance of healthy food choices and the risks of obesity.

**Building the Coalition**

The Florida Blue Foundation's support in 2010 enabled the City of Hialeah to begin building a coalition of community partners whose collective work would encourage healthier lifestyles among Hialeah's residents and reduce the risk of childhood obesity. It was a steep challenge for the City.

"It was new to all of us," said Marla Alpizar, who leads the city's Education and Community Services Department. "This was our first project where we built a community coalition. We didn't know how to do that."

The City staff also recognized that they did not have the subject matter expertise needed for the project. To overcome these deficiencies, they reached out to the University of Miami and contracted with staff there to serve as subject matter experts, facilitators and evaluators.

"They stayed with us throughout the process and that was a smart move," Alpizar said. "Their expertise helped us and their presence gave us instant exposure and credibility."

In January 2011, the city began building the coalition, establishing an advisory committee and four working groups:

- Health, nutrition and fitness
- Early childhood and education
- Marketing and community outreach
- Data and evaluation

In addition, the advisory committee conducted four focus groups to learn the perspectives of:

- City Parks and Recreation Department staff
- Parents of pre-school children
- Caregivers working with middle school children
- Parents of middle school children

Ultimately, 100 community partners participated in the coalition, bringing a breadth of perspectives to the community strategy.

“It brought the community together and helped us develop many partnerships,” said Elizabeth Miro, assistant director of the city Department of Education and Community Services.

In 2011, Hialeah Healthy Families presented its Call to Action, identifying four targeted areas for change:

- Environment
- School involvement
- Family engagement
- Social marketing and community outreach

“These areas were chosen as most likely to make an impact on childhood obesity both at the prevention and intervention level,” the report noted.

As follow-up to the Call to Action, the Florida Blue Foundation underwrote a series of small grants to community organizations to address the challenges identified in the report.

“A lot of the mini-grantees were schools and it helped them to see the City as a good partner,” said Toca. “It has enhanced our image.”

**Moving Forward**

Much of the work established through the mini-grants has taken deep roots in Hialeah, especially within schools and pre-schools, where gardens and acknowledgement of healthy eating habits are much more prevalent.

Of the four areas targeted by the Call to Action, marketing and outreach has presented some of the greatest challenges. Lagomacini’s goal is to have Hialeah Healthy Families as recognizable as the famous “Got Milk?” campaign – at least within Hialeah.

“It’s just not quite there yet,” he said.

As the community moves forward, it will place an intensive focus on marketing and outreach, looking to use the City’s television station as well as traditional and social media to extend their message.

“We want everyone in Hialeah to be thinking about this,” Lagomacini said.


*The John F. Kennedy Library is a resource to share information about healthy eating, good nutrition and active living.*

## John F. Kennedy Library

The Roman philosopher Cicero said, “If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need.”

Grisell Torralbas agrees. She should know. She has both.

As director of Hialeah Public Libraries, she oversees the South Florida city’s public library system from her offices at the main branch, the John F. Kennedy Library. “I have always loved to read, I love books,” she said. “I knew this is what I would end up doing.”

Torralbas also oversees the library’s edible garden, a roughly 20’ x 20’ fenced parcel located just across the parking lot from the library’s main entrance. The garden, she admits, was a new adventure. “I knew nothing about gardening,” she said. “That [creating the garden] was kind of courageous for us. You don’t just plant it. You have to maintain it!”

But Torralbas had a hunch that the garden could make a difference for her library clients and the community of Hialeah.

Hialeah’s residents are almost exclusively Hispanic and with that culture comes a heightened risk of childhood obesity for the city’s youngest residents. The Hispanic traditional diet features salty, starchy and fatty foods and a few extra pounds are considered appealing, a sign of prosperity and loving care.

In 2011, Hialeah Healthy Families, a community coalition, sought to encourage community organizations to take action to reduce the risks of childhood obesity. Torralbas saw an opportunity and applied for funding, underwritten by the Florida Blue Foundation. Her goal was to use the library as a resource to share information about healthy eating, good nutrition and active living with the people of Hialeah.

Initially, she took small steps, buying some children’s books about healthy eating, such as *Sylvia’s Spinach* and *Ana Cultiva Manzanas*, which became part of the reading list at children’s story time. For adults, the library offered some cooking demonstrations. Ultimately, the library hosted an appearance by the Short Chef, a local celebrity chef who focuses on teaching children about healthy eating.

“The Short Chef was our big event for that summer,” Torralbas said, and response was huge. “As soon as they [library patrons] found out it was about nutrition, they wanted to come.”

In the wake of that success, Torralbas and staff considered what other steps they could take. The idea of the garden came up.

While Torralbas had no experience with gardening, the library's program coordinator Alina de la Barrera did and was eager to share her knowledge.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the library engaged Ready To Grow, a Miami-based company that specializes in designing, planning and planting edible gardens, to install the library garden.

"I don't know what [Ready To Grow] used in that garden, but everything really grew," Torralbas said.

And the garden bears her out. Even in early September – still the hot, "dead" time for Florida gardens – the garden was producing. Bananas were heavy on the trees. Mint, chives, bay leaves and other herbs were thriving. Pepper plants were bushy and the papaya vine was lush. Several varieties of spinach awaited harvest.

The garden has five raised beds with additional plants around the perimeter. A picnic table with an umbrella provides a comfortable place for children's story time sessions.

"Once a month, each of our weekly programs participates in a garden activity," said Torralbas.

The young adults program might devote an evening to weeding. On Family Night, patrons might harvest produce and take it home.

"It's so important to incorporate families – parents and grandparents, who, after all, are the ones who are going to do all of the cooking," Torralbas said. "It is Healthy *Families*, after all."

Produce from the garden also is used for children's snacks, de la Barrera said, noting the full bed of strawberry plants. "They love the strawberries."

The library's efforts have made an impact, Torralbas said, in part by changing the children's willingness to eat different foods.

"When Alina made vegetable pies," Torralbas said, "the parents said 'my child won't eat *that!*' but they did eat it!"

"There was nothing left," de la Barrera said.

And it has changed the library's own practices. They no longer serve sodas at meetings or offer pizza and ice cream for the children. "We have water or fruit juice and healthier foods."

"Some people say this is not our mission," said Torralbas, "but I think it is. We are teaching, they are learning – and we are encouraging them to read."

*South Florida Autism Charter School leaders incorporated a healthy diet and abundant exercise into the curriculum to engage students, parents and staff.*

# South Florida Autism Charter School

For parents with a child on the autism spectrum, healthy eating and good weight management may not be on the top of their mind. Yet, for children with autism, weight management can be a significant concern.

At South Florida Autism Charter School (SFACS), leaders have incorporated attention to a healthy diet and abundant exercise into their curriculum in an effort to combat childhood obesity. And, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, school leaders are focusing not only on their students, but on the entire family.

South Florida Autism Charter School was founded in 2009 to meet the needs of the lowest performing children on the autism spectrum – those who may have communication or behavioral issues or who need training in self-care skills. The school offers grades K-12 and serves students up to age 22 through a "post-graduate" program.

As a charter school, it is part of the Miami-Dade County Public School system, and students attend free of charge. About 60 percent of the school's 185 students come from Miami-Dade County, with 75 of those from the city of Hialeah. (The remaining 40 percent come from neighboring Broward County.)

For these students, childhood obesity, food and weight issues are not unusual.

"A lot of the students on the spectrum have food and weight issues," said Dr. Tamara Moodie, principal/executive director and one of the founders of SFACS.

There are multiple reasons.

Treats often are used as rewards when autistic children exhibit proper behavior or accomplish certain tasks. While this is a sound strategy, Moodie said, it easily can be misused or over-used. And too often, the "rewards" are unhealthy treats, such as cookies or candies or high starch/salt snacks.

Autistic children also often are picky eaters. They may have sensory issues in the mouth that make them eschew certain foods with a different "mouth-feel" and limit their diet to foods that "feel" comfortable. Or, they may have behavioral issues that make mealtime challenging and frustrate efforts to introduce new foods.

Autistic children often have a difficult time getting the proper amount of exercise. Any exercise can be challenging for children on the spectrum. If they have communication or behavior issues, it can be difficult to find exercise environments that are accepting of their behavior.

And for those children from Hispanic families, these challenges may be aggravated by a traditional Hispanic diet high in salty, starchy, fatty foods.

Recognizing the unique health challenges faced by her students, Moodie used support from the Florida Blue Foundation to do several things.

School leaders began recording each student's weight and BMI at the start of the school year, and offering help, including one-on-one counseling, for those students who were overweight or obese. They began offering more healthy snacks and sending those snacks home with students so parents could incorporate them into the home menu. They launched an annual field day for families to encourage family bonding as well as stimulate exercise and instill good health habits.

Susan Leon has seen the difference such changes can make. Her son, Reno, now 16, is a student at SFACS.

When the healthy eating and exercise initiative began, Leon said, Reno was extremely overweight. But under the new curriculum, the physical education teacher taught Reno to do exercises, Leon said, and taught her how to work with him at home on the exercises. Today, the family has a treadmill at home and Reno uses it regularly, up to 30 minutes a day. "He is much slimmer," Leon said, and noted with pride that he recently tried eating a cheese omelet.

The school also has added extra community trainings, to help parents and siblings address the health and exercise needs of the autistic family member.

"I did a parent workshop once," Moodie said, "and I asked parents 'How many of you work out regularly?' and almost all of them raised their hands. They were working out four, five, six days a week. When I asked how many worked out with their kids, no hands went up. I thought, 'Why is this?'

"Then I tried exercising with an autistic student. It is hard. They can't move easily. One of them screams and we don't think anything of it, or they have an accident and we are used to that. But you can't have your child doing that at the Y or the gym. People wouldn't understand."

Her experiences with the health and exercise curriculum have informed Moodie's plans for the school's future.

The school currently is housed on the third floor of a traditional Miami-Dade County public middle school. But Moodie has identified a site and is planning to build a campus for SFACS that would include both a classroom building and a community center, with a gym and fitness center, for students, their families and other families in the community with autistic children.

"Our kids need to be doing yoga and dance – they should be experiencing everything that we are experiencing," said Moodie.

"Autism strains the family. We have a lot of divorces. If parents had more of an outlet, if they had places they could go and be together, if they could go on a date, it would help mend some of that."

The campus may be a few years away – a fundraising campaign must be completed first. But Moodie's energy and commitment are unflagging. And she gives much of the credit for her vision to the lessons learned about health and exercise.

"The work supported by Florida Blue Foundation has been a great jumping off point for us and our students," she said.


*Centro Mater Child Care Center Garden is used to teach science, technology, engineering and math.*

# Centro Mater Child Care Center at Walker Park

It's lunchtime at the Centro Mater Child Care Center and in the three-, four- and five-year-olds' classrooms there are plenty of surprises.

The children sit quietly at tables, family-style. Their lunch plates are a riot of color: chunks of bright orange carrots, red juicy tomato, deep green raw spinach leaves, velvety black beans and a whole wheat tortilla encasing a small amount of chicken and cheese.

Most surprising of all – the children are eating it.

"These are the critical ages, because most food habits are established before the age of five," said Angel Alvarez. "We have an opportunity to educate these children."

Alvarez, a nutritionist by training, now oversees operations at the five Centro Mater child care centers in Miami-Dade County. Three of those centers are in the city of Hialeah, including the one at Walker Park, where the students were having their family-style lunch.

"We teach them to serve one another, to eat as a family," Alvarez said.

Centro Mater Walker Park provides child care for about 80 children, ages 3-5. The other four centers provide child care for children from six weeks to five years old, and provide after-school care for children ages 6-12. Across all centers, the institution serves about 1,600 children annually.

Centro Mater was established in 1968 by a Cuban nun who recognized the need for child care among newly-exiled Cuban families in Miami-Dade County. Hialeah has long been a destination for Cuban and other Hispanic immigrants, and today the centers thrive under the management of Catholic Health Services within the Archdiocese of Miami.

About 90 percent of Centro Mater's students come from impoverished families, Alvarez said. Almost all are from Spanish-speaking households, and most are immigrants. Combined, these factors put the children at high risk for childhood obesity.

Lower-income families tend to focus on cheap, calorie-dense foods – sweet drinks, chips, starches that are filling, he said. The families often lack both the knowledge of healthy eating habits and access to resources to learn about healthy eating. And cultural values celebrate excess weight: fat children are considered thriving children; "gordito" (chubby) is good.

Alvarez estimates that 30-40 percent of the students at Centro Mater are either overweight or obese.

In 2011, when the Hialeah Healthy Families coalition began its campaign to combat childhood obesity, Alvarez was eager to participate. With support from the Florida Blue Foundation, Centro Mater Walker Park created an edible garden for its students on a small plot of land at the rear of the school.

“That snowballed,” he said. “It expanded to all of our Centers. We had a gardening consultant who helped us put in gardens at three centers.”

The Walker Park garden is a small space, with four raised beds inside a fenced area. The children love it, said Soledad Serrano, the program manager at Walker Park.

“The garden taps into all of their developmental areas,” she said. “They work on motor skills, colors and numbers. They are counting the ladybugs in the garden.”

“This is all STEM,” Alvarez said, referring to the garden’s ability to teach science, technology, engineering and math.

From the gardens, Centro Mater expanded its interest in teaching children about healthy eating and an active lifestyle, infusing the lessons throughout their entire program.

“This [garden] program was like a spark,” Alvarez said.

The centers now offer cooking classes, with even the pre-K students serving as “Little Chefs.” The Centers have a new dietician who has overhauled the Centro Mater menus with an eye toward healthier eating. They have two SPARK-certified, early childhood physical education instructors. They have developed a breast-feeding policy and the infant-care center was certified as a breast-feeding-friendly center.

And, for the past two summers, they have hosted a wellness summer camp in partnership with the University of Florida’s Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), which provides free nutrition classes for limited-resource families.

Working with families – getting them to change their nutrition and eating habits—remains a challenge.

“Now that’s a nut I would like to crack,” Alvarez said.

Serrano agreed: “We have had children come here at age three who are still eating pureed food and their language skills are not as developed because they have not learned how to use the muscles in their mouth.”

The center screens all children for weight and BMI, alerting parents when children are at risk. It often is not a message parents want to hear.

But Serrano sympathizes with the challenges families face, explaining that for many, survival is the focus, not health.

“They are worried about eating, not eating healthy,” she said.

There have been positive experiences, where the children have influenced parents and families are growing plants on their balconies and beginning to experiment with gardening.

“With the kids, it’s easy,” Alvarez said. “A couple of months here and they are eating healthy.”

*Healthy eating at child care centers includes lessons in math and science. Lunch includes whole grain tortilla, baked chicken with cheese, tomatoes, carrots, spinach and black beans.*

## Miami-Dade College

There are more than 300 child care facilities in the City of Hialeah. Some are large centers serving a dozen or more children. Others are home-based centers where the provider cares for only a few children.

Together, these centers provide an important gateway to the children of Hialeah – children who, because of their culture and circumstance, are at high risk for childhood obesity.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, Karina Pavone and her colleagues at Miami-Dade College have launched an innovative initiative to help Hialeah's child care providers better support good nutrition and active lifestyles for their young charges – and improve their own nutritional health along the way.

Miami-Dade College is a large, state-supported college with seven campuses across South Florida. The Hialeah Campus serves the communities of Hialeah and Miami Lakes, with 6,000 credit students and about 2,000 continuing education students. In 2011, those continuing education students were Pavone's primary concern; she served as chairperson for continuing education at the school.

And she knew nothing about childhood obesity.

But she heard about Hialeah Healthy Families, a community coalition supported by the Florida Blue Foundation focused on reducing the risk of childhood obesity in Hialeah, where 94 percent of the population is Hispanic.

"I went home and started doing some research," she said. "I was blown away."

The mother of two children, Pavone had not thought much about nutrition. Her children ate a typical Hispanic diet, which tends to be rich in salty, starchy and fatty foods. Her mother provided after-school care for the children and often made the family dinner – "delicious, but not very healthy," Pavone recalls.

As her awareness grew, she focused on raising awareness among her peers at the college.

An early grant from Hialeah Healthy Families underwrote a poster contest among faculty, to make them aware of the issue, and a family-style dinner for parents and children from child care centers with which the college had affiliations. About 40 people attended, enjoying a healthy Hispanic meal and hearing a nutritionist explain – in Spanish – the basics of healthy eating.

She then moved on to create a digital library of information and resources about childhood obesity – with links to everything from research and documents to

videos and movies, such as “Super Size Me.” (Ultimately this digital library was given to Hialeah Healthy Families to be made accessible to the public through Hialeah public libraries.)

While these and other activities were interesting and useful, Pavone was looking for a way to achieve greater impact.

The child care system itself provided the inspiration.

Regardless of size, each of Hialeah’s child care centers must be licensed by the State of Florida’s Department of Children and Families. And each provider must receive regular continuing education in order to retain that DCF license.

What if nutrition and exercise classes could be part of the continuing education curriculum?

“The DCF regulations don’t always address the detailed nutrition and activity needs, particularly of Hispanic families,” Pavone said. “And many of these providers are, themselves, obese; they are not setting a good example for the children.”

She also knew that many of the providers had little or no knowledge of English, or lacked the resources to access training. But they needed to keep their child care businesses operating – it was an important source of income.

“The CEU [continuing education units] credits gave us the carrot, the bait, to get them to take the class,” Pavone said.

With support from the Florida Blue Foundation and Hialeah Healthy Families, Pavone and her colleagues developed two courses: a 5-hour nutrition course and a separate 5-hour music and movement course, intended to promote activity.

“We had a waiting list of people wanting to take the courses,” she said.

In addition to providing the courses, Pavone staff carefully selected five of the larger child care centers – ones with adequate physical space and staff support – to have edible gardens installed at their sites. The college recruited Ready To Grow, a Miami-based company that specializes in designing, planning and planting edible gardens, to work with the centers, install the gardens and show staff how to engage the children in the work of the garden.

“Getting emails from the Center directors with pictures from their harvest was really special,” Pavone said.

In the second year of the program, five additional child care centers received gardens.

"It's so important to build a foundation for healthy eating when you are young," Pavone said. "Without realizing it, the kids are getting exercise, they are getting science education, they are learning colors, they are learning math by counting the tomatoes."

Beyond helping the students, the experience has helped the college build its capacity. Staff sought and received funding from new sources to underwrite a new round of CEU training that includes both in-classroom training and on-site demonstrations.

"We learned that providers have a hard time taking what they learn in a lecture and translating it into action at their centers," Pavone said. "Having someone observe you in your environment and help you can make a big difference."

In the past year, Pavone has been reassigned to Miami-Dade College's InterAmerican Campus in the heart of Miami's Little Havana neighborhood. There, she hopes to replicate the Hialeah program.

"Little Havana has as great a need as Hialeah," she said.


*Small Bites is an in-school cooking and nutrition program that aligns with Common Core State Standards in math and English; children learn about good nutrition and basic cooking skills while preparing healthy snacks for the classroom.*

## Common Threads

To make an easy granola parfait, combine ½ cup of plain yogurt with ¼ cup of Cheerios™ and ¼ cup of raisins.

How much parfait do you have? (Hint: ½ + ¼ + ¼ = 1)

Is this a healthy snack? Yes!

Lessons such as this unfold regularly in four Hialeah elementary schools, through the efforts of Common Threads, a national organization that brings cooking demonstrations and nutrition lessons into the classroom.

“We believe that cooking is a life skill,” said Jeannie Necessary, the organization’s national program manager, based in Miami. “Our goal is to prevent childhood obesity and reverse the trend of generations of non-cookers.”

In Hialeah, fighting childhood obesity takes on even greater significance. In a community that is 94 percent Hispanic, children are at greater risk of obesity, thanks to a traditional Hispanic diet that is high in salty, starchy, fatty foods.

Common Threads began its Florida work in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. “Miami-Dade County really has been ahead of the curve on this issue,” Necessary said. “They had made changes to their menus before the USDA instituted its new policies.”

Today, Common Threads provides nutrition education and cooking classes in 32 Miami-Dade County public schools. Their target audience is elementary children ages 8-12. They also offer some advanced classes for middle-school children ages 13-16.

Common Threads approaches school district leadership first, getting buy-in from the top down, Necessary said. “When we go into the schools, the principals are ready. It’s very cool to see them accept the program and grow with it.”

Though Common Threads was working in Miami-Dade County, it did not have a strong presence in Hialeah. And Necessary recognized that Hialeah children had distinct needs. Not only was the community overwhelmingly Hispanic, but its lower-income levels and large immigrant population were additional risk factors.

Lower-income families typically rely on more calorie-dense foods and have limited resources to access fresher, healthier foods. Immigrants often face the additional challenges of language barriers, inhibiting their ability to access good nutrition information in a new culture.

Working with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation and the Hialeah Healthy Families coalition, Common Threads launched its program at four Hialeah elementary schools.

Common Threads' basic program is called Small Bites. It is an in-school cooking and nutrition program that aligns with Common Core State Standards in math and English. Children learn about good nutrition and learn basic cooking skills while preparing healthy snacks for the classroom.

"It's very tactile," Necessary said. "Children love doing things with their hands. They get very excited about putting together a parfait with yogurt, raisins and Cheerios."

Common Threads provides a teacher training program to prepare teachers to deliver Small Bites and Common Threads provides all of the support materials and supplies for the classes. There is no cost to the school.

Common Threads also offers an after-school cooking class – Cooking Skills and World Cuisine – as well as family cooking classes and a garden class that teaches students how to prepare, plant and maintain a garden.

Schools often provide access to school kitchens and cafeteria space for the after school programs and, Necessary said, the kitchen staff frequently will stay and participate. "We have seen some of the school chefs get ideas from our programs," she said.

At Hialeah's James H. Bright Elementary, physical education teacher Mercado Mariano volunteered to participate in the cooking classes during the summer camp program held at the school. Through Common Threads, he learned how to cook.

"He gained his own cooking skills through our classes," Necessary said, "and of course he knows how to teach and how to manage a class. Now he is one of the best teachers that we have."

In many schools, Small Bites becomes more than just a cooking class, it becomes part of the math or science curriculum. At Bright elementary, it will be part of the science curriculum this year.

Initially, Common Threads had difficulty fitting Small Bites into a teaching calendar that was dominated by standardized test preparation and execution, Necessary said. "But some of our teachers now realize that Small Bites can be used to support concepts used in testing, and they are asking that the program be started earlier in the year."

At Hialeah's Twin Lakes Elementary, there are waiting lists to participate in Small Bites, said Alena Sheriff, a third grade teacher. Twin Lakes also offers an after-school program for students, and, sometimes, family members participate. The class is limited to 20 because of the size of the school kitchen, she said. "I always have more students who are interested."

The after-school program helps bridge the gap between what the students are learning at school and what the families are doing at home. Parents realize their children will eat different foods: "I hear parents say 'She's never eaten that,' and then she eats it!" Sheriff said.

The children also demonstrate that they have a great capacity to learn. By the time the eight-week course is completed, the children have mastered knife skills, handling a full-sized chef's knife with confidence.

"They are using a great big chef's knife and they know how to do it – they know how to hold their hand like a bear claw to keep their fingers out of the way," Sheriff said. "Our parents often gasp, but we say 'leave them alone; they know what they are doing.'"

"The kids love Small Bites," Necessary said. "They ask for it. We had one teacher who said the children's behavior was better on the days they had Small Bites because they enjoyed it so much."

*Twin Lakes Elementary School garden is a food forest that wraps around the school and students learn from tending to and reaping from the "forest."*

# Twin Lakes Elementary School

In the world of edible gardens, there are many types. There are traditional row gardens, for instance, where vegetables and fruit trees are planted in neat rows across the land, or raised bed gardens, where crops are planted in large boxes that contain a rich soil mix.

And then there are food forests – where plants and trees are planted next to, over and beneath one another, mimicking the natural forest where different varieties of plants happily coexist in close proximity.

At Hialeah's Twin Lakes Elementary School, students from Pre-K through fifth grade have become food "foresters," learning from, tending to and reaping the bounty of a 5,000-square-foot food forest that wraps around the rear of the school.

"It's a mimic of the natural forest ecology setting," said Eddie Ricenos, who helped start the garden and works to maintain it. "We teach the children about forestry, about the layers in the forest and the food chain. And it's a more efficient use of space, because you are growing up as well as out."

With about 470 students, Twin Lakes Elementary is a small school by Miami-Dade County standards, said Principal Ivette Bernal-Pino. It is a Title I school, meaning at least 40 percent of its students are eligible for free and reduced lunch programs. Bernal-Pino said the majority of the students come from Spanish-speaking homes – not surprising in Hialeah, where 94 percent of the population is Hispanic.

The combination of lower incomes and high Hispanic concentration puts the children of Twin Lakes at higher risk for childhood obesity. Traditional Hispanic diets are rich in salty, starchy and fatty foods, and the culture celebrates extra weight as a sign of prosperity. Lower income families typically choose cheaper, calorie dense foods and often lack knowledge about healthy eating and good nutrition.

About 2012, The Education Fund, a Miami-based nonprofit that supports public schools, provided funding for Twin Lakes to establish a small, raised bed garden. Recinos was an art teacher at Twin Lakes at the time, and worked to start the garden. He saw that it could be more.

"As an artist, I always see the big picture," he said, "and I saw what this garden could be and the impact it could have."

In 2014, Twin Lakes connected with the Hialeah Healthy Families coalition to combat childhood obesity. Support from the Florida Blue Foundation took the Twin Lakes garden to the next level, creating a true outdoor classroom with seating and gathering space for children to experience and learn.

“It helps in their science,” said Alena Sheriff, a third grade teacher at Twin Lakes who has lead responsibility for the garden. “It’s real life; what’s in the textbook is there in the garden.”

Despite the challenges facing students at Twin Lakes, they are outperforming their peers at schools in wealthier neighborhoods in their science scores, said Principal Bernal-Pino.

“And we think it’s because of the garden,” Sheriff said.

In addition to science, the garden is used in math: students measure rainfall and harvest amounts and learn about weights and measures. The youngest learn their colors and learn to count. And they, in turn, teach the staff:

“One girl found a bug in the garden that I didn’t recognize,” Sheriff said. “She researched the bug at home and came back and told me that it was a good bug and we shouldn’t kill it. The garden gives them a platform to be independent. They love the garden.”

Recinos left his position as art teacher and joined the staff at The Education Fund, managing its garden program, which now has gardens in 51 Miami-Dade elementary schools. In that role, he helped to expand the Twin Lakes garden into a true food forest.

The Twin Lakes food forest meanders through the school’s courtyard, around corners of buildings, along the fence line and around the back of the school. Some areas are in bright sunlight and other areas are densely shaded. All along the way, plants grow in a natural confusion of colors and vines and foliage. Sheriff hands a visitor leaf after leaf to taste, eat and smell.

There is Mayan spinach and Malabar spinach and Okinawa spinach – each different in shape and flavor. There is lemon grass, moringa, a high-protein plant often ground into a powder, and two varieties of edible hibiscus (the cranberry variety has a delightful lemony tartness). There is pigeon pea, jicama and Cuban sweet potatoes, papayas, star apple, yucca and Barbados cherries, Cuban oregano and lemony bay leaf.

“The children put oregano or bay leaf into their water to flavor it,” Sheriff said.

There are banana trees clustered in rings around a compost pile and Sheriff is particularly proud to show off the figs on the fig trees. “Figs aren’t supposed to grow this far south but we have figs!”

“There’s an illusion of scarcity right now,” Recinos said, “but if you are growing the right things you can have abundance.”

And the abundance of the garden is shared with the children and their families.

All grade levels are involved in the garden. The older children serve as “garden ambassadors” and introduce the youngest children to the garden, to the feel of the soil, to the creatures that live in the soil and to the food that comes from the garden.

Harvests from the garden are incorporated into the snacks and meals that the children receive at school.

The garden also is used in the myriad parent workshops that the school hosts in its efforts to engage parents, provide resources to the community and demonstrate to the community that the school is about more than just academics, said Principal Bernal-Pino. On one September morning, representatives from the University of Florida Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program were giving nutrition courses – in Spanish and sign language – to about nine adults in the school library.

“That is good attendance,” the principal said.

The school also has hosted health fairs, free mammograms, BMI testings and family field days – all in an effort to drive positive changes in diet and exercise at home.

“The kids bridge the gap in nutrition,” Bernal-Pino said. “We reach them and through them we can reach the families.”

But the food forest has its own “outreach.”

“In some places, the plants are bursting through the fence,” Sheriff said. “A man stopped me one day and asked if he could have a cutting of the Cuban oregano. I told him parents were welcome to share in the garden. He said he wasn’t a parent, just someone from the neighborhood who had noticed the garden as he passed by. The garden invites people to come in.”


*Florida Department of Health in Duval County served as the Lead Organization – Monique Ellis, Gloria McNair, Kelli Wells, Karen Tozzi*

# Jacksonville

## *A Matrix of Strategies for a Complex Community*

Jacksonville, Florida, is a very big place. The city and its home county, Duval, are one in the same thanks to consolidated government, meaning that Jacksonville has 897,698 residents living in a sprawling 918-square-mile area—the largest city in land mass in the continental United States. The public school system, with 125,000 students attending 195 schools, is the 20th largest in the nation, larger than Baltimore, Atlanta, Denver or Austin, Texas.

Embracing such a large community can be a challenge.

“The community’s size works against you because of the challenges of scale,” said Dr. Jonathan Evans, a pediatric gastroenterologist at Nemours Children’s Health System in Jacksonville.

Evans should know. For a dozen years, he has worked with a host of community partners to address rising rates of childhood obesity in Jacksonville. He was among the founders of—and remains a co-chair of—the Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition, which brings together health experts and community volunteers to reduce childhood obesity and promote healthy and active living.

Thanks, in part, to the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the Coalition has found ways to build a platform for change in Jacksonville, by combining community education, advocacy and public policy, and strategic interventions with discrete constituencies.

“I think the Coalition has been very valuable to Jacksonville,” Evans said. “It may not be something that you see on a big billboard all over town, but we have been supporting the work of volunteers for more than a decade. We are getting stakeholders and people of influence who can change things at the table to talk about what is happening in the community.”

**The Childhood Obesity Challenge**

Across the country, communities like Jacksonville are struggling to combat rising rates of childhood obesity. While, overall, Florida’s rates of childhood obesity are in the middle ranges (Florida, with 13.4 percent of 10-17-year-olds reported to be obese, ranks 38th in the nation), the issue remains one of concern. Between 1989

and 2003, Florida saw rates of childhood obesity among low-income 2-4 year-olds jump from 8.3 percent to 13.4 percent[1].

Childhood obesity can increase the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. Children who are overweight are more likely to suffer from bullying and low self-esteem, and are more likely to be overweight in adulthood.

Spurred by concerned citizens such as Dr. Evans; his colleague at Nemours, Dr. Donald George; Dr. Jeffrey Goldhagen, chief of community pediatrics at University of Florida Health Science Center Jacksonville; and staff at the Duval County Health Department, the Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition was established in 2003. Among its early achievements was the 2006 publication of *Duval County Evidence Based Policy Development for the Prevention of Childhood Obesity*, which contained a host of recommendations to address issues of nutrition, physical activity and community engagement to reduce the incidence of childhood obesity.

**Developing a Community Strategy**

In 2008, the Florida Blue Foundation provided funding to help the Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition build on its previous work and develop a community action plan to reduce and prevent childhood obesity. Jacksonville became one of six communities across Florida supported by the Foundation in its Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative to combat childhood obesity.

The goals of the action plan were twofold:

- To increase awareness of the childhood obesity challenge through community education
- To recommend specific actions, strategies and policies for individuals, organizations and government

“Childhood obesity is a health issue with multiple causes and therefore the solution needs to be addressed from all sectors of the community,” wrote the Coalition chairs.

Beginning in September 2008, the Coalition pulled together more than 100 community partners to work on the action plan, dividing them into six working groups addressing:

- Data, surveillance and evaluation

[1] Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance Survey results as reported by The State of Obesity, a project of the Trust for America’s Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

- Early childhood
- Health care professionals
- Marketing, advertising and the media
- Parents, family and community
- Policy and advocacy

The work groups developed content expertise and then made specific and actionable recommendations relevant to their subject area.

The Coalition also conducted three focus groups of parents of school-aged children that informed the action plan.

By spring 2009, the components of the action plan were completed and the full report was released in June 2009.

The Call to Action included recommendations for virtually every sector of the community—city government, the health care system, schools, early child care providers and advocates, community and faith organizations, employers and the media.

Some of those recommendations addressed broad-based policy changes: for instance, encouraging the City of Jacksonville to invest more in recreational infrastructure—bike lanes, green spaces, sidewalks and paths—in disadvantaged communities. Others were more targeted: encouraging employers to foster worksites that encourage breastfeeding.

“The coalition recognizes the importance of grassroots advocacy, as well as the central need for policy-level change,” the report stated.

## Jacksonville Community Call to Action to Reduce Childhood Obesity

**City of Jacksonville:**

Increase investment in neighborhood infrastructure that supports active living and increases/improves access to healthy foods

Establish incentives to encourage grocery store development in disinvested neighborhoods

**Health care systems and providers**

Encourage Duval County Health Department to improve quality of foods in disinvested neighborhoods through public health standards and surveillance

Educate and train health care providers in effective childhood obesity prevention and treatment

**Schools**

Fully implement the District Wellness Policy by ensuring healthy food options are available throughout the school day, implementing staff and student wellness initiatives, and providing regular structured and unstructured times for physical activity

Enforce state law requiring 150 minutes of instruction physical activity per week for elementary students and 225 minutes per week for middle school students

Provide opportunities for students to make healthy eating and active living choices during and after school

**Early childhood**

Work with Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative to implement the Baby-Friendly Hospital initiative

Expand state-mandated training for child care workers to include training on healthy eating and active living for children ages 0-4

Provide sample menus, curricula and instructional materials emphasizing the value of healthy eating and active living to providers of child care to children ages 0-4

**Community, faith and youth organizations**

Encourage organizations to adopt local schools and promote healthy eating and active living

Create and implement youth-led peer involvement campaigns that address healthy eating and active living

**Media and marketing**

Design a local core child obesity prevention message and media campaign

**Employers**

Implement and/or strengthen workplace policies encouraging breastfeeding

Partner with and support efforts to address childhood obesity

**Bringing the Recommendations to Life**

To help move the work beyond the recommendation stage, the Florida Blue Foundation underwrote a series of "mini-grants"—grants of about $10,000 each—that the Coalition could award to community organizations to further the goals of the call to action and support work in the field.

Like the recommendations, these mini-grants addressed both systemic changes (for example, encouraging all local hospitals to adopt the standards of Baby-Friendly USA, Inc., which promotes breastfeeding) and work with discrete populations (teaching parents and children at a homeless shelter the benefits of good nutrition and exercise).

The mini-grants supported work that benefitted residents from all parts of the community. While many grants supported programs that work in the city's urban core, where health outcomes historically are not as positive, grants also supported the work of community organizations that serve adults and children from across Jacksonville.

In the view of Evans, this mix of approaches is appropriate.

"It [the solution to childhood obesity] starts with personal responsibility," he said, "but if all I have access to is convenience store or fast food, I can't eat healthy. If I want to go outside and play and exercise and get all sweaty for an hour or so, but my neighborhood isn't safe or there is nowhere for me to go after school, or if my mother is working and coming home in the evening and the only

thing between work and home is a fried chicken restaurant and she is too tired to cook or we don't have fresh food in the house, you see? It comes down to community infrastructure. It can conspire against even the best personal efforts.

"The coalition is important in helping the community see and address those infrastructure needs. We also have done a lot of grass roots work. And it all has come together nicely to improve our overall approach to childhood obesity."

**Lasting Impact**

The Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition continues to meet monthly, educating an ever-growing cadre of practitioners and advocates. At a recent meeting, a physician from the University of Florida Health System gave an educational presentation on the risks of obesity during pregnancy to mother and child.

In addition, new coalitions have formed, focused on specific topics.

The Food Policy Council works to improve access to healthy foods, particularly in Duval County Public Schools. It hosts an annual Food Summit, works to eliminate sugary drinks and improve the availability of healthy food choices in the schools, supports sustainable community gardens and advocates for the acceptance of EBT cards at area farmers markets.

The Breastfeeding Coalition is focused on encouraging breastfeeding of newborns throughout Duval County and urging all Jacksonville-area hospitals to comply with the standards of Baby-Friendly USA, Inc.

The Coalition also has sparked the Mayor's Council on Fitness and Well-Being and the First Coast Worksite Wellness Council.

In the coming year, the Coalition plans to launch a broad social media outreach campaign based on the Florida Department of Health's 5-2-1-0 campaign. (5-2-1-0 refers to 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily; 2 hours or less of screen time daily; 1 hour or more of exercise daily; and 0 sweetened beverages.)

"We want to use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and websites to spread the 5-2-1-0 message throughout the community," said Monique Ellis, Healthy Jacksonville program coordinator for the Florida Department of Health in Duval County. The "couriers" for this message, Ellis says, will be the network of community organizations, faith-based organizations and community partners who have come together through the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative.

"They will continue to focus on the particular work that each organization does," Ellis said, "but through social media, they will collectively spread the message throughout the community."

If experience is any indication, the commitment will be lasting. Evans said he has been surprised at how many people are interested and have remained interested through the years.

"These are all volunteers—people who have regular paying jobs but come here on their own time because they care about this."

He knows, however, that the path ahead is uphill.

"At the very best, our results have been only to stabilize childhood obesity—perhaps to stem the rise," he said. "You really need a cultural and societal shift at the dinner table. And you need a shift in the classroom, to get a better balance between studying for standardized tests and getting outside for an hour of exercise."

*Some experts report that breast-feeding is a means to promote long-term healthy weight.*

# Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative

In the battle against childhood obesity, no child is too young to benefit from healthy eating choices. Not even newborns. And, according to many experts, the mother who chooses breast milk over infant formula is making a healthy choice for her child.

But not all new mothers know this, and not all health care providers are equally proactive in educating new mothers on the benefits of breast-feeding.

That is why the Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation's Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, is working to ensure that all women who give birth in a Jacksonville area hospital are appropriately informed about the benefits of breast-feeding and supported in their efforts to breast-feed.

The Collaborative's goal is to have all Jacksonville-area hospitals achieve designation as "Baby-Friendly." While that may sound simple, the steps to being designated as a "Baby-Friendly Hospital" are precise and do not come without challenges.

In the six years that the Collaborative has been at work, only two area hospitals have achieved Baby-Friendly status.

But that is about to change.

**The Case for Breast-feeding**

While most childbearing women have some knowledge about the benefits to the infant of breast-feeding, they probably do not think of it as a means to promote long-term healthy weight. But the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that for every month an infant is breast-fed, the child's odds of being overweight decrease by 4 percent.

Why? Several reasons.

Breast milk is healthy—it contains nature's ideal mix of sugars, carbohydrates and amino acids.

Breast milk also contains important bacteria—*Bifidobacteria*, for example. According to Giulia Enders' *GUT: The Inside Story of our Body's Most Underrated* Organ, "children with insufficient *Bifidobacteria* in their gut in their first year have an increased risk of obesity later in life."

And breast-fed babies control their own portions. They decide how much to eat and when, making it less likely that they will overeat. The caregiver giving the bottle may encourage the baby to "finish up that last ounce," even though the baby is satisfied, beginning a habit of overeating.

"Breast-feeding is really correlated to being a childhood obesity prevention strategy," said Heather Huffman, the public health/nutrition program director for the Florida Department of Health in Nassau County, who leads the Breastfeeding Collaborative.

About 77 percent of babies born in the U.S. are breast-fed at some point, the CDC reports, but fewer than 40 percent are breast-fed exclusively for the first three months of life. The American Academy of Pediatrics would like to see infants exclusively breast-fed for the first six months, with breast-feeding continuing through 12 months of age as other foods are introduced.

Locally, a 2008 report by the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI) endorsed widespread support for breast-feeding as a strategy to reduce infant mortality in Jacksonville. "Jacksonville hospital obstetric departments should stop automatically furnishing take-home baby formula and initiate aggressive breast-feeding educational and support programs for new mothers," the report stated. "In addition, the hospitals and birth centers should seek the status of Baby-Friendly hospital."

**Getting Started**

The Breastfeeding Collaborative began its work about the time that the JCCI report was released. Representatives of the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition, the Health Department and the Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition recognized that they shared an interest in promoting breast-feeding, and that the Baby-Friendly Hospital initiative provided a strong framework to help advance the cause.

The members of the nascent collaborative partnered with a local community organizing group—Interfaith Coalition for Action, Reconciliation & Empowerment (ICARE)—and called on the chief executive of each area hospital. Through those meetings and a subsequent community-wide assembly, each hospital agreed to participate in the collaborative, though they stopped short of endorsing the Baby-Friendly Hospital initiative.

But connecting the hospitals with the collaborative was a major step. Not only did it create a forum where members could share ideas and information, it brought a critical group of people to the table and created a center from which to

drive broader education, both laterally, across institutions, and vertically, up and down the leadership chain of each institution.

In late 2009, with funding from the Florida Blue Foundation, the collaborative invited Dr. Joan Meeks, then with the Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children in Orlando, to visit Jacksonville and share her perspective on the benefits of breast-feeding. Meeks, who now is associate dean for graduate medical education at Florida State University College of Medicine, is a pediatrician with expertise in newborn care, lactation and breast-feeding and childhood nutrition.

On her visit, Meeks participated in pediatric grand rounds at Baptist Health. Grand rounds are a medical teaching practice in which medical students, health care workers, physicians and others review and discuss the diagnosis, care and clinical program of specific patients, often at the patient's bedside.

Meeks also presented information about the value of breast-feeding at a luncheon for Jacksonville-area neonatologists who, in this region, provide the lion's share of in-hospital pediatric care for newborns.

Her visit and presentations were critical to stimulating new thinking among the area's physicians.

"MDs are going to listen to other MDs better than they will to nurses," said Loretta Haycook, RN, IBCLC, with Baptist Health, who is a member of the Collaborative. "Dr. Meeks was very dynamic and she left her audience much more educated and aware [of the benefits of breast-feeding]."

The Florida Blue Foundation funding also provided some small grant dollars to help specific institutions tackle unique challenges they faced. For example, UF Health Jacksonville, which is the region's academic health center and the primary provider of indigent care, wanted to find a more efficient way to share information about the benefits of breast-feeding with new mothers. As a teaching hospital, UF Health Jacksonville experiences high staff turnover as residents come and go. How could they provide patient education independent of that staff?

The solution came through the television monitors in every patient's room: the grant allowed UF Health to develop a new mother education "channel" that broadcast 24-hours a day, providing an information resource easily available to new mothers. "We found it was most frequently used in the middle of the night, when the baby is awake and there are no family or friends present," said Sandy Inman, IBCLC, with UF Health Jacksonville.

From the convening to the mini-grants, these events set the stage for significant changes.

**Becoming a Baby-Friendly Hospital**

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative was launched almost 25 years ago by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to encourage "an optimal level of care for infant feeding and mother-baby bonding." Today, there are 286 hospitals and birthing centers in the United States that have met the criteria to be designated "Baby-Friendly Hospitals."

What are those criteria? They include having a written policy and fully trained staff that support informing all mothers about breast-feeding, helping mothers initiate and maintain breast-feeding, providing infants no food or drink other than breast milk unless medically indicated, and fostering a support network to assist mothers after discharge from the hospital.

The challenges that hospitals face in meeting the criteria often have less to do with the issue of breast-feeding itself than with the costs and efforts associated with meeting the criteria and staying in compliance.

One of the biggest challenges is staff training. All staff in the hospital must be trained, not just the labor and delivery nurses or those who work on the maternity ward. Providing time for training is a staffing and cost issue. While there are online training programs, they generally charge per student, and costs can mount quickly when scores of individuals must be trained.

There are other costs as well. There are costs associated with the designation itself. And, there is the cost associated with shifting from open inventories of infant formula provided free by the manufacturers to managed inventories of infant formula purchased by the hospital. (Though Baby-Friendly hospitals encourage breast-feeding, they use infant formula when mothers decline to breast-feed or when it is medically indicated.)

In all, members of the Collaborative agreed, it can cost $10,000-$15,000 for a hospital to meet the criteria and achieve designation. And then there are ongoing costs to maintain that designation.

But the Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative has proven a strong resource to help institutions meet—and lower the cost of—these requirements.

**Supporting One Another**

As of September 2015, two Jacksonville-area hospitals are designated as Baby-Friendly: Naval Hospital Jacksonville, located on Jacksonville Naval Air Station, and St. Vincent's Southside, one of three St. Vincent's (Ascension Health) hospitals in the area.

At Naval Hospital Jacksonville, where two to three babies are born every day, the challenges of becoming a Baby-Friendly hospital were exacerbated by its status as a military hospital, where the commanding officer changes every two years. "We needed the CO [commanding officer] and XO [executive officer] to buy in and not all of them did," said Rachel Nieves, RN, IBCLC, at Naval Hospital Jacksonville.

Through the years, the hospital's committed staff members began implementing many of the criteria for Baby-Friendly status without the designation—including eliminating the free gift bags provided by the formula companies. When the CO and XO support for Baby-Friendly aligned, the hospital was ready, and designation was granted in October of 2011.

"It took us 10 years," said Nieves said, "and it's a challenge every day."

At St. Vincent's Southside, the director of women's services was the driving force behind certification, said Jean Macomber, RN, IBCLC, at the hospital. But even with a champion in leadership, the change was not without its difficulties.

St. Vincent's adopted an innovative approach to the training challenge, creating its own training program. Using the curriculum outline provided by Baby-Friendly USA, staff developed many of their own training modules. While that required an initial investment of time and effort, it eliminated much of the per-person costs that can prove burdensome to hospitals.

St. Vincent's Southside received its designation in fall 2014.

Today, these two hospitals have the highest rate of breast-feeding among new mothers in the community, said the Health Department's Huffman.

And they have been an inspiration—and a help—to their peers.

St. Vincent's Riverside, the Southside hospital's sister institution, likely will be the next area institution to be designated. The Riverside hospital has had its letter of intent approved by Baby-Friendly USA, meaning the institution is officially on its way to achieving designation.

"We can look at everything that they [Southside] do and learn from them," said one of the nurses working at the Riverside hospital.

Collaborative members predicted that Baptist Health, which operates four hospitals in the greater Jacksonville area, will seek a system-wide designation, beginning later in 2015.

And Inman from UF Health Jacksonville noted that UF Health Gainesville, the "parent" of UF Health Jacksonville, already has achieved designation," so Jacksonville likely will take a look at it."

**The Power of Collaboration**

Certainly the Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative has been a force encouraging the Baby-Friendly hospital designations. But the role of the Collaborative goes beyond mere moral support and encouragement.

The Collaborative members are taking the training modules developed by St. Vincent's and conducting the necessary research to enhance and expand them. Once completed, the entire training system will become the property of the Collaborative, available to any participating institution.

While there are obvious financial benefits to this, there are qualitative benefits as well.

"This will give us consistent training across the community," said Huffman. "Staff who may move from one institution to another will have what they need and can move seamlessly."

And new initiatives impacting the health of newborns have surfaced—for instance, developing the infrastructure in each institution to provide pasteurized donor breast milk for infants who, for some reason, do not have access to their mother's milk. UF Health Jacksonville began providing donor milk in May 2014; Flagler Hospital in St. Augustine is in the process of beginning; Baptist is in the process of establishing a "milk room" in it neonatal intensive care unit.

In addition, the Collaborative collects and analyzes data from the hospitals and is beginning to solicit feedback from women who access WIC (Women Infants & Children) benefits about their hospital experiences in an effort to provide better feedback to the institutions. (More than half of all babies born are eligible to participate in WIC and most take advantage of it because of the financial benefits.)

The Northeast Florida Breastfeeding Collaborative is yet another demonstration of the power of bringing people together, sharing knowledge and collectively, moving communities forward.

*I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless provides activities and experiences to encourage children at the center to get more exercise and eat healthier foods.*

# I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless

Exercising regularly and eating fresh, nutritious foods sounds like a simple enough recipe for good health.

But what if you and your children are living in a friend's spare room? Or, worse yet, in your car? Or on the street?

For the homeless, the focus is on food that is cheap and filling. It often comes from a convenience store or fast food outlet and can be loaded with fats and sugars. Physical activity is about survival, not exercise.

As a result, in what may seem a great irony, homeless individuals are at great risk for obesity.

Researchers at Harvard Medical School found that one-third of homeless individuals in a recent study were obese—about the same rate as in the general population. Among homeless women, however, 43 percent were obese, compared with 35 percent in the general population.

"Obesity," the authors concluded, "may have replaced underweight as the new malnutrition of the homeless."

**The Most Vulnerable Population**

Maxine Engram and Carlton Higginbotham know the statistics. They see living, breathing evidence of them every day at the I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless, tucked under the bridge in east downtown Jacksonville.

"Diabetes is rampant in our population," said Engram.

"Seventy-four percent of our clients have hypertension," said Higginbotham.

Most of the women at the Center have been victims of domestic violence, they said. Many are very young mothers. Their children often have experienced poor parenting and very chaotic living circumstances.

"Our kids are about as vulnerable a population as you can get," said Higginbotham, who is on the Center's development staff.

And, chances are, the Center won't have them for a very long time. The typical length of stay at the Sulzbacher Center is 90 days. "What often happens with our mothers, though," explained Engram, "is that a boyfriend shows up and they just take the children and leave with him."

Engram is undeterred, however. She has worked at Sulzbacher for seven years and serves as the Children's Program Manager. She has seen the difference that Sulzbacher can make, even in a short time.

"We often have kids who don't want to leave the shelter, because this is the only safe, stable place they have known where there was structure and regular meals and a safe place to sleep," she said.

She recounted the numbers of students who came in with poor school grades and finished the year on the A-B Honor Roll thanks to Sulzbacher's tutoring program.

"I was out shopping the other day and went to check out. The cashier—a young woman—looked at me and said, 'Miss Maxine! You don't remember me? I was at Sulzbacher!' It took me a moment to place her, but I did, and there she was, looking good, with a job and making it work out there. I was so proud of her."

If Sulzbacher can make an impact on a child's sense of security and school grades, it also can make an impact on his or her attitude about nutrition and exercise.

**Innovative Exercise Strategies**

In 2012, the Sulzbacher Center sought and received a grant from the Florida Blue Foundation's Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative to support the Center's Children's Fitness and Nutrition program.

The goal was to provide activities and experiences to encourage children at the Center to get more exercise and eat healthier foods.

Exercise is a challenge at the Center because there is so little outdoor play space for the children. The building that houses families and children sits beneath three overpasses. A small dirt front yard contains a basketball goal on a small paved area. Nearby, a modest fenced playground with rubber surface has a slide and some climbing equipment.

But, there are more parents and children than ever at the Center. In 2011, families with children represented 21.4 percent of the community's homeless population; in 2014 they represented 33 percent. According to the Jacksonville Emergency Services and Homeless Coalition's Point In Time count, there were 242 homeless families in 2014, comprised of 674 individuals, of whom 377 were children (under age 18).

This booming growth has forced the Center to stack supplies and furniture in hallways and throughout the executive offices, which are located in a portable building on the property. On one hot summer afternoon, pre-schoolers at

playtime shared a room with Center staffers participating in a training session.

With the help of the Florida Blue Foundation funding, the Center found an exercise solution that was both flexible and fun.

The Center hired an instructor to teach Zumba, a popular dance-fitness course that uses high-energy hip-hop and Latin music, to children from kindergarten to age 16.

“This was particularly pertinent for us because of the lack of room we have for children to play,” Engram said. “The children loved it. It was music that they knew and could relate to. It was fun. And they felt good doing it.”

The Center also hired an instructor to teach Zumbini—a Zumba-style course for children from birth to age 5 and their mothers. These classes had the added benefit of aiding parent-child bonding.

“We are changing the laziness syndrome,” Engram said. “When they [parents] get involved and get active, they discover that they like it.”

**The Challenge of Summertime**

Summertime is a particularly challenging time at Sulzbacher. Children are out of school with hours of free time on their hands. Their presence may make it more difficult for parents to work, go to school or look for work. And meals normally taken at school now must be taken at the Center.

To ease some of the pressure, the Florida Blue Foundation funding supported seats for Sulzbacher students at the six-week summer camp run by the Police Athletic League (PAL). The camp provides academics to keep skills sharp through the summer, as well as field trips and swimming for children ages 6-14.

The busy schedule helps children burn up a lot of energy, which every parent knows can be a good thing.

“When they come home [from camp], they have had a very full day,” said Engram.

The camp also provides indirect benefits to the youngsters.

“If they [children] weren’t at camp, they would be here, wandering down to the convenience store or the fast food restaurant, eating junk and staring at their video screens all day,” Engram said. “It’s not just what they are doing at camp, it’s what they are NOT doing here.”

**Healthy Meals and Healthy Eating**

The Sulzbacher kitchen prepares and serves more than 500,000 meals each year. It is the only place in Northeast Florida where someone who is hungry can receive two nutritious meals a day, every day, 365 days a year.

While the kitchen staff works hard to ensure the meals it serves are well-balanced and healthy, the program staff works to teach parents the importance of good nutrition—for themselves and their families—and how to instill good eating habits in their children.

The Center provides a nutrition and obesity prevention program to parents who are living at the Center and it includes nutrition information in the Life Skills program it offers for residents.

With support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the Center engaged University of North Florida students to create a program specifically for children that addressed healthy eating versus non-healthy eating. Children learned about foods that come in different colors and different shapes. The program included hands-on activities for the children followed by some "taste testing."

The UNF students also taught the children how to read food labels and discussed how to make good food choices at fast food restaurants.

"You've got to start this [healthy eating habits] when they are young," Engram said. "We would like to get the children to the point where they own the nutrition."

In the classes, children are encouraged to do fun things with food, Engram said, such as making characters out of raw vegetables. "It introduces them in a playful way to new foods and we encourage them to try them."

But teaching parents how to reinforce these lessons is equally important.

"I've seen these children eat vegetables in my class but then go to the dining hall and tell Mom, 'I don't like that,'" said Engram.

"A lot of what we do is teaching the parents how to teach their children to eat healthy. They [the parents] know what healthy food is but when the child says, 'I don't want that,' they just let it go and let the child make the choice. You and I were told what to eat and we were expected to eat it. We have to teach these parents how to provide that kind of direction to their children."

**Moving Forward**

With the rapid growth in the population of homeless women, children and families, the Sulzbacher Center is embarking upon an ambitious plan to build a new campus of transitional housing for families. While the project has many dimensions, it is clear that support for healthy eating, good nutrition and healthy living will be important components.

The site identified for the project is in close proximity to established community health resources, such as the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition and local WIC (Women, Infants and Children) offices. A full-service grocery and drug store also are nearby.

According to Evin Willman, who is handling communications for the project, a community garden is planned on the site and there are multiple options for developing programming around that garden, but details are not yet firm.

And, recreational resources are an important part of the plan, Willman said, with age appropriate playgrounds throughout the facility.

Whether through short-term stays at the shelter, or longer-term stays in transitional housing, residents at Sulzbacher are being exposed to, taught about and encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyle practices to benefit themselves and their children.


*Students of all ages are involved in the gardens, planting seeds, transplanting larger plants and harvesting the produce.*

# North Florida School of Special Education

The Isaiah Hart Bridge rises 141 feet above the St. Johns River in downtown Jacksonville. It is a steep climb—called the Green Monster by runners who tackle the half-mile stretch with a 6 percent incline—but the view is spectacular: the Dames Point Bridge, the docks at Talleyrand, the downtown business district, and the great sweep of river southward to Orange Park.

Megan Bell, now 24 years old, has made the run to the top of the Hart Bridge three times, running in—and completing—the Gate River Run, the nation's largest 15K run.

"It's hard," she said. "I fell. Skinned my knee." But the view? "It's awesome."

In some respects, Megan is an unlikely athlete. She has Down syndrome. And, in her early teen years, she was severely overweight.

But Megan attends North Florida School of Special Education, and the school's commitment to good nutrition, exercise and a positive attitude have transformed her and many of her peers.

North Florida School is a small private school tucked on seven acres in an industrial corner of Jacksonville's Arlington neighborhood. Founded in 1992, the school serves students ages 6-22 with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. It also provides a "post-graduate" program for students over age 22.

While the school has a solid history, its enrollment has soared in the past five years, going from 58 students in 2010 to a fall 2015 enrollment of 110, plus 35 post-graduate students. The impetus for this growth has been a campaign for excellence grounded in a culture of good nutrition and lots of physical activity.

In 2010, North Florida School of Special Education began implementing a new strategic plan that called for the school to become "the premier private school in Jacksonville for students with intellectual disabilities," said Executive Director Sally Hazelip.

"That meant we would have to achieve FCIS [Florida Council of Independent Schools] accreditation and, to do that—and to be a premier school—we needed to offer a full array of extracurricular activities: music, art, library and physical education."

With the help of a grant from Florida Blue Foundation's Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, Hazelip began the school's transformation by adding the physical education program.

"It was the *most* important thing for us to do," she said.

**Physical Education—A Must for Special Needs Students**

Hazelip is a runner. Her degree is in recreational therapy. She has four children, the youngest of whom has Down syndrome. When he was 13, she enrolled him in North Florida School, a decision that led to her volunteering, serving on the board and, eventually, being asked to serve as Executive Director.

When she first came to North Florida School, she said, there was very little physical activity for the students. And, yet, physical activity is especially important for North Florida School's students.

Down syndrome children are born with low muscle tone, Hazelip said, and it is important to get them exercising early in life. For students with autism, exercise can provide an important release. "We have children here who log three miles a day just walking the track because they need a sensory break," she said.

Research supports Hazelip's view.

The Journal of Intellectual Disability Research reports that "physical fitness levels should be stimulated [in children with intellectual disabilities]. This should start in young children (<8 years) and the children with the most severe cognitive impairments need special attention."

For children with autism, exercise not only addresses fitness concerns, but also obesity prevention, which is a critical issue; more than half of all children with autism spectrum disorder are either overweight/obese or at risk of being overweight, according to Autism Speaks, the world's largest autism science and advocacy organization.

"It is not surprising to discover that physical activity has been shown to improve fitness levels and general motor function of individuals with autism," Autism Speaks reports. "Besides improving fitness, motor function, and behavior in individuals with autism, among the most important advantages of physical activity are the social implications of participating in sports and exercise. Physical activity can promote self-esteem, increase general levels of happiness, and can lead to positive social outcomes, all highly beneficial outcomes for individuals with autism."

"Kids with intellectual disabilities respond well to athletics when they start young," Hazelip said. "But a lot of disabled kids don't get the opportunity to be physically active."

To ensure her students had that opportunity, Hazelip started a comprehensive physical education program that she called Fit 4 Fun.

"We called it that," she said, "to show students that getting out and being active was good for fitness but it was also very social."

Using the Florida Blue Foundation Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative funding, Hazelip hired a physical education instructor and acquired the materials needed for the class. The grant provided the seed funding that enabled her to demonstrate the merits of the program, and it was not long before other donors added their support, funding construction of a track around the playing field and fitness trails on four undeveloped acres of school property.

"That's the beauty of being able to create programs," Hazelip said. "You build them up and then it's easy to get others to see the benefits and support them."

Today, all North Florida School students have physical education three days a week and the track and fitness trails are open to students every day.

"They are out there having a ball and they are not sitting in front of the TV," Hazelip said. "It catapulted our kids to believe that fitness was important, but it also helped our staff believe that it was important for *these* kids to be active."

**Good Food, Good Nutrition and Good Weight**

At North Florida School of Special Education, fitness, good nutrition and weight management go hand in hand.

"We try to teach our kids about eating healthy and exercising every day," Hazelip said. "Obesity is one of those things that we *can* control. Our kids are battling a lot of things. Having an intellectual disability is not something they can control. But our kids learn that they *can* control their weight and their muscle tone."

Lessons about healthy food and good nutrition begin in the earliest grades with hands-on learning.

North Florida School has an extensive garden that makes efficient and strategic use of available land on the small campus. There are raised bed gardens, tower gardens and pole gardens. Edible grasses are grown as border plantings; berry bushes run along the fence line.

A cold frame provides a protected environment where seedlings can grow before being transplanted to the garden. A hydroponic garden uses water from a large fish tank that houses a small school of tilapia, which are harvested once a year for a school fish fry.

Students of all ages are involved in the gardens, planting seeds, transplanting larger plants and harvesting the produce.

The harvest goes to the school's culinary program, where students learn cooking and food handling skills and prepare a meal for the school each Thursday.

North Florida School also has two businesses that rely on produce from the garden:

- Berry Good Farms on the Go is a food truck that provides some prepared food as well as produce from the North Florida School garden. Staffed by the school's post-graduate students, the food truck goes to festivals and gatherings throughout Jacksonville.
- Barkin' Biscuits are hand-made dog biscuits prepared with the grasses grown in the garden. Students make the biscuits, which are used by a local Chick-fil-A restaurant as a treat for their drive-through customers with dogs, and by Pet Paradise, a chain of pet resorts and day spas.

**Megan's Transformation**

When Megan first came to North Florida School of Special Education in 2005, she was definitely not an athlete. She weighed "close to 200 pounds," said her mother, Susan Bell. The family had been through a difficult period, with the death of Megan's father, and "we were really in a fog," Mrs. Bell said. Megan was doing well at North Florida School and "I didn't really notice her weight."

When Hazelip began focusing student's attention on athletics, physical education and nutrition, the time was right for Megan. "It was like this perfect storm that came together for her," Mrs. Bell said.

Hazelip encouraged Megan to become more active. "When she started, she couldn't do much," Hazelip said. "But she stuck with it."

North Florida School has numerous community partners who help its students progress physically. Special Olympics Young Athletes Program helps to build foundational skills in the school's youngest students so that by the time they reach the age of 8, they are prepared to participate in Special Olympics.

Unified Special Olympics brings children without disabilities to the school to play soccer and basketball with the North Florida School students. "Because they come here and they play here, on our students' own turf, our students are more relaxed and comfortable and it is easier for them to learn," Hazelip said.

The school also always sponsors a River Run Team, led by Hazelip.

Megan progressed in her personal fitness program and "I started working with her," said Hazelip. "I started running with her. She joined Weight Watchers and [started] running with me regularly."

Today, Megan weighs a healthy 120 pounds and is a member of Hazelip's River Run team. She also participates in Special Olympics surfing and has been named to the Ron Jon Surf Team Riders, a group of about a dozen surfers of all ages who are sponsored by Ron Jon Surf Shop.

She works part-time at a neighborhood grocery store and she works in the post-graduate program at North Florida School, where she is a cook in the kitchen.

"My job is chopping," Megan said. "I work really hard."

**Victory on The Green Monster**

The Hart Bridge comes at the end of the almost 10-mile River Run. Average runners have been at it for 90 minutes or more when they begin to ascend the ramp to the summit.

Though the bridge itself is only 3/4 of a mile, the full ascent and descent covers slightly more than a mile, giving the stretch of the race the nickname "the Green Mile," with the uphill portion called the "Green Monster."

Hazelip's team of special students often includes her son, and she is always there both to provide encouragement and share the victory. And, she lends a helping hand when needed: When Megan fell at the top of the bridge and skinned her knee, it was Hazelip who came to her aid and helped her finish the race.

Reaching the top of the bridge is a special moment for Hazelip, and for the students who run with her.

"We always stop at the top of the Hart Bridge and hold hands. I tell them, 'Look out there; look around you! You are at the top of the Hart Bridge! There are so many people who cannot do what you are doing!'"

The moment is special even for those waiting at the finish line.

"It just brings tears to your eyes," said Mrs. Bell.

*Jacksonville Arboretum & Gardens – a community asset that connects with the community need to get more children to exercise and engaged in healthy activities.*

# Jacksonville Arboretum & Gardens

In the battle against childhood obesity, one expects communities to engage organizations such as the YMCA, health institutions or children's programs.

But an arboretum?

In fact, the Jacksonville Arboretum & Gardens has been a strong partner in the fight against childhood obesity since 2011. The 120-acre park nestled in the Arlington neighborhood has been the setting for an innovative program that has motivated scores of grade-school children and their families to walk and hike its five miles of trails.

An arboretum is, essentially, a tree park—a parcel of land devoted to trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. The Jacksonville Arboretum opened in 2008, located on land once mined for minerals containing titanium. Because of its unique history, the property features 13 distinct ecosystems spread across hills and deep ravines not commonly found in flat, coastal Florida. The Arboretum has capitalized on these features by developing an extensive trail system, with trails ranging in distance from 800 feet to one mile.

Rachel Sulkers, an ecologist who served on the Arboretum's board, saw the potential connection between the community asset provided by the Arboretum and the community need to get more children exercising and engaged in healthy activities.

With the help of a grant from the Florida Blue Foundation's Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, Sulkers and other Arboretum volunteers (there is no paid staff) installed an informational kiosk and signage in the park to encourage use of the trails.

"That was great but, really," Sulkers recalled, "the kiosk was static. I thought, 'How do we get more people out here to see this?' Then it hit me: competition!"

A competition could have a dual purpose: improving health through outdoor activities and exposing children to nature. "Childhood obesity is a growing concern in our community," Sulkers said. "I'm especially passionate about educating kids—if kids don't know nature, they won't care about nature."

Sulkers and her colleagues created Step Out In Nature—a program that encouraged park visitors—particularly school children—to compete with one another for the greatest number of steps taken while walking and hiking the Arboretum trails.

For each Arboretum trail, distance was designated not only in miles but in the number of steps one would take walking the trail. The Lake Loop Trail, for example, is 0.3 miles long—or 1,200 steps.

Sulkers then began visiting schools.

Initially, she encouraged area schools to take field trips to the Arboretum, which they did. But she realized, over time, that student participation in field trips did not effectively link families to the activity or result in the level of repeat visits that Sulkers had envisioned.

“The kids might tell their parents about the field trip, but they weren’t begging to go back,” Sulkers said.

So the program was modified to encourage individual and school competitions.

With support of the Florida Blue Foundation, a Step Out In Nature website was created that allowed students (and others) to register and maintain a log of their Arboretum visits and steps taken.

Sulkers visited the schools again. Response initially was slow.

“I think [schools] are overwhelmed with organizations pushing good programs and ideas,” she said, “and the $300 cash prize we were offering for the school with the most participants wasn’t large enough to get their attention or make it worth their while. But I was consistent, repetitive and I followed through.”

Her perseverance paid off and the merits of the program won followers.

“In September [2014], I sent some Step Out In Nature fliers home with students,” said Kim Schiffers, a 5th grade math and science teacher at Kernan Trail Elementary School, located about five miles from the Arboretum. “I didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. I just passed it out.

“But sometime later, one of my kids told me that he had been out there and done the trails and how much fun it was.”

That caught Schiffers’ attention.

Each Duval County Public School is required to have a Healthy School Committee as part of its overall wellness policy. As a member of the Kernan Trail Healthy School Committee, Schiffers was alert for activities that would promote student health in new and creative ways.

“I took it [Step Out In Nature] to the Healthy School Committee and said, ‘We should be doing this.’ “

With encouragement from school leaders, more Kernan Trail students participated. In addition, the school sponsored a Saturday field trip to the Arboretum for students and their families. Sulkers and other Arboretum

volunteers were there to encourage hiking and provide some nature programs. About 30 students and their families participated in that event, Schiffers said.

“We have some [students] who are very athletic,” Schiffers said, “but then we have some who struggle; just walking around the track, they get winded. We tell them ‘just keep moving forward.’ It’s a challenge to keep them motivated to do it.”

But Step Out In Nature helped.

“They loved being outside and exploring,” Schiffers said. “Having a place to roam and explore was terrific for them.”

By the end of the school year, Kernan Trail students had logged enough steps—243,638—to earn the school a second-place award (and a $200 cash prize).

But that paled in comparison with the winning school, Sabal Palm Elementary, where students logged 968,734 steps, largely due to the efforts of three students—Adam Walton, age 11, and his twin siblings, Yesmeen and Yusef Walton, age 6. Adam won the individual competition (and a $100 prize), logging 110,100 steps during the 2014-15 school year, while the twins placed 2nd and 3rd, each logging more than 100,000 steps.

“We go there all the time,” said their mother, Melissa Walton. “We went almost every day after school and on the weekends.”

Hiking the trails became part of the family’s weekly activities, Walton said. The children do not play organized team sports, but they love running and exploring at the Arboretum, which is about three miles from their home.

They learned of the Arboretum and the program through the Run/Walk coach at Sabal Palm, and it was the competitive aspect that really got their attention. “We ended up competing against the Run/Walk coach and her children,” Walton said.

But, for Walton, there also was the benefit of exposing the children to exercise and nature. “We want them to grow up knowing there is a balance in life,” she said. “Screen time can be fun but there are other things that are fun, too.”

The twins, she said, loved the wildlife at the Arboretum—snakes, birds, insects and the alligator that lives in the pond. Adam, she said, just loved to “be out there in untamed Jacksonville—being a wild man.”

Sulkers appreciates both perspectives. She recalled one student who, after spending an hour at the Arboretum, ran up to her and exclaimed, “This is like a natural playground!”


*Coalition Member and Karen Landry, War on Poverty-Florida*

# Opa-locka

## *New Dreams for a Changing Community*

Opa-locka is a city of dreams.

It began as the dream of aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss, founder of what is today Curtiss-Wright Corp. In the 1920s, he developed Opa-locka in the style of the Arabian nights, with elaborate Moorish architecture and streets named Ali Baba, Sharazad and Sinbad. That dream was shattered by the great Florida hurricane of 1926, which left more than 300 dead and 800 unaccounted for and demolished much of the young city's infrastructure.

In the 1950s, Opa-locka was part of the post-World-War II Florida dream, a growing community anchored by a U.S. Navy installation at the municipal airport. That dream began to unravel in 1959, when the Navy closed the installation, jobs disappeared and the city began a slow and steep decline. By 2000, Opa-locka was known more for its poverty and crime than its historic past.

Today, Opa-locka faces the same challenges as many low-income urban communities in South Florida: disinvestment and deteriorating infrastructure, racial and ethnic distrust, and multiple barriers to healthy living for its residents. Access to fresh, healthy food is limited and a high crime rate discourages adults and children from outdoor activities.

But the residents of Opa-locka still have big dreams. They are preserving their architectural heritage. They are building community pride and citizen engagement. And, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, they are working to create a community where children are healthy and good nutrition and abundant physical activity are a way of life.

**Turrets, Domes and Diversity**

To the casual visitor, Opa-locka presents a surprising visual. It has the orderly streets and rows of modest homes typical of South Florida planned communities, but with an overlay of disrepair and decay. In the heart of town, at the end of Opa-locka Boulevard, a voluptuous City Hall is topped with exotic domes and turrets fit for a Khalif. Along the Boulevard, fabulous arches have been restored, gracing the entrance to courtyards outside of government buildings. And, on the corner of the Boulevard and Ali Baba Avenue, across from the Universal Thrift Store, another domed Moorish treasure is being retrofitted for use as a children's clinic.

If its architecture sets Opa-locka apart from other troubled communities, its demographics do not.

The community is defined as 4 square miles – one zip code (33054) – with about 15,600 residents, 40 percent of whom live in poverty. Median household income is less than half the state average. One third of the adults over age 25 did not complete high school and fewer than 10 percent of the residents have a college degree.

In 2007, when the War on Poverty-Florida, a nonprofit that works to revitalize distressed communities, scanned the State of Florida to identify areas with high concentrations of poverty, Opa-locka hit its radar. Executive director Karen Landry helped the organization launch programs to provide financial literacy training to residents in the hopes of helping them stabilize household finances and better sustain their families.

It was hard going. Residents were skeptical. “We had to go deep into the neighborhood through principals and church leaders,” Landry said. “The apathy that you often find is a result of people having things ‘done to’ them too many times, and not ‘done with’ them.”

But after years of work, driving back and forth from her home office in Jacksonville, Landry gained credibility. “We were able to win them over.”

She built a good relationship with the Opa-locka Community Development Corporation, which had been established in 1980 but had limited resources until 2010, when it received a $20 million federal Neighborhood Stabilization grant. She grew relationships with leaders in city government. But just as importantly, she built relationships with a number of organizations outside of Opa-locka that work with different constituents across Miami-Dade County, including the Farmworkers Association of Florida and the Hispanic Coalition based in Miami.

In the cultural melting pot that is today’s Opa-locka, those relationships were critical.

Opa-locka’s population is 60 percen non-Hispanic African-American/Black, 2 percent non-Hispanic white and 38 percent Hispanic. Of the roughly 5,800 Hispanics, 50 percent are of Cuban ancestry, the remainder a mix of Puerto Rican, Latino and Mexican ancestry.

These distinctions matter to those who live in Opa-locka. Different groups are considered to have different levels of power, influence and access. Jealousies and resentments bubble up frequently in conversations.

And yet the very diversity of the community means that no one group can control change. To effect change, Landry learned, everyone must be represented – and welcomed – at the table.

**Learning about Childhood Obesity**

Because of her home base in Jacksonville, Landry was familiar with the Florida Blue Foundation's childhood obesity initiative, which was launched in Jacksonville in 2008. When the Foundation suggested that she build on her work in Opa-locka and try to engage the community in reducing the risk of childhood obesity, she agreed.

"We knew there was a relationship between health and education and financial instability," Landry said.

She also knew that the most effective strategy to improve community conditions was to build a broad-based, diverse coalition of stakeholders armed with good information.

In late 2009, War on Poverty-Florida partnered with Florida Memorial University, a private, historically black university just outside of Opa-locka, to begin that community engagement effort. "The literature is replete with evidence that children of color suffer disproportionately from obesity," wrote then-University President Sandra Thompson. "The [initiative] provides a framework in which to begin a holistic approach to addressing this problem for the children living in the Opa-locka community."

During the next year, the Building a Healthy Community Childhood Obesity Prevention Project tackled two major challenges: bringing a diverse group of stakeholders together to engage in the issue, and developing quality information about the extent of the challenge in Opa-locka.

## Childhood Obesity Prevention Project

**Early Learning**

Increase early screening prior to entering school

Educate parents and child care providers about the importance of good nutrition, physical activity, and reduced television, computer usage and video games

Strengthen partnerships with health care providers to offer education and information on child health and development

Provide parent education on childhood development and healthy nutrition

**Schools and After-School Programs**

Provide food demonstrations and taste-test activities

Initiate a daily food journal for students

Plant organic gardens and integrate food and nutrition lessons into curriculum

Engage school wellness committees and parent advisory committees in best practices

Implement 4-H programs in schools

Increase access to healthy and affordable foods

Recruit teachers and staff to be role models for healthy living and cooking

Engage parents and school wellness committees in promoting healthy food choices

**Community and Faith-based Organizations**

Identify a medical home for all Opa-locka residents

Ensure access to healthy and affordable foods

Engage faith-based leaders' wellness programs

Promote nutrition education and cooking demonstrations

Develop community and faith-based gardens

Use the train-the-trainer model to expand wellness programs

Develop common messages

**Built Environment**

Increase police foot patrol and community policing

Encourage community pride and beautification

Expand access to community gardening and agriculture

Engage local businesses to support gardens, environmental protection and beautification

Connect community service to public service

Increase lighting and cameras, walking paths and access to recreation areas

Project leaders reached out to multiple sectors – health care, government, faith communities, local businesses, higher education and community based organizations – to identify stakeholders. The Hispanic Coalition was instrumental in bridging cultural differences, Landry said.

“In order to break into that area, we needed Hispanic groups,” said Landry, who is black. “Our deliberate outreach needed the Hispanic Coalition.”

“Without a coalition of community stakeholders, you can’t go anywhere,” said Marlene Arribas, president of The Hispanic Coalition. “This community is a salad bowl. It is very diverse.”

The Hispanic Coalition did more than just bring people to the table, Landry said. “They taught us how to make them feel welcome.” That included respecting language and cultural differences and taking the time to build understanding and trust.

Ultimately, the coalition connected with more than 1,000 individuals, with a lead advisory council and seven working groups addressing different facets such as the built environment, early childhood and education or policy and advocacy.

To develop knowledge of local conditions, the partnership conducted surveys, working through the schools. "We asked school children about nutrition and health," Landry said. "The children were aware of diabetes, though they didn't necessarily have the technical language. They might know that their grandmother 'had sugar problems.'"

They also engaged parents, taking the surveys door to door. One of the elementary school principals walked the neighborhood with the survey, encouraging parents to participate.

Ultimately, they received more than 275 responses. These responses, along with basic research about the community and its resources – or lack of resources – provided the information that was used to help the stakeholders identify priorities for action.

Two major findings emerged:

- Concerns about community safety inhibited young people in Opa-locka from getting regular exercise
- Limited access to healthy, high-quality foods, and a reliance on convenience stores, frustrated residents' ability to improve their diet

**From Learning to Action**

The Childhood Obesity Prevention Project developed a Call to Action, which was presented to the community in October 2010. It identified four key areas for attention:

- Early Learning
- Schools and After-School Programs
- Community and Faith-Based Organizations
- The Built Environment

With support from the Florida Blue Foundation, the Project awarded mini-grants to community-based organizations to address changes in each of these areas.

Today, thanks to these grants, there is an expansive new playground in Opa-locka, school children have had hands-on lessons in nutrition and growing fresh fruits and vegetables, and youngsters have opportunities to discover the world beyond their community. A new pediatric health clinic is under construction and

stakeholders are working on plans to develop a "food hub" with a farmers market and small-business opportunities for local residents.

Change has happened at the individual level, too. Landry recalled one youngster who learned how to read nutrition labels and influenced his grandfather's food shopping habits. "That grandfather has been a strong advocate for us with city government," she said.

Engaging local people in the process of change is of utmost importance, Landry said. "The traditional way is 'build it and they will come.' Opa-locka convinced me that you must build it from the ground up, with the people who will benefit from it.

"The greatest asset in any community is the human asset. Everybody has aspirations. You are good at what you do if you can draw that out one person at a time."

*Magnolia North Park is a green and welcoming park with a playground and walking/fitness trail that encourages better health among Opa-locka's children and families.*

# Opa-locka Community Development Corporation

About a mile east of the Opa-locka City Hall is a wedge-shaped, 10-block area that is emblematic of Opa-locka's past and, many hope, its future.

In the past the area was known as "the Triangle" and was a haven for crime and drug activity. The neighborhood became so notorious that city and state officials installed permanent barricades blocking vehicular access along the western boundary. As of 2010, 95 percent of the buildings in the area were absentee-owned rental properties. Even the Miami-Dade Housing Authority had abandoned its properties in the Triangle.

Today, the Triangle has been renamed Magnolia North and with the help of the Opa-locka Community Development Corporation (CDC), the Florida Blue Foundation and others, it is being transformed. The goal is to create a green and welcoming neighborhood with parks, playgrounds and a walking/fitness trail that will encourage better health among Opa-locka's residents.

Opa-locka Community Development Corporation was established in 1980 and during its early years focused on increasing the stock of affordable housing in the community. Since 1980, the CDC has developed 145 single-family units and 2,500 units of rental housing.

But in 2010, the organization's efforts took a giant leap forward with receipt of a $20 million Neighborhood Stabilization Program award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. With that potential, the CDC elevated its efforts and took a long-term, comprehensive look at Opa-locka. Part of the long-term plan that emerged was the transformation of the Triangle into Magnolia North.

Adopting a focus on health and wellness was an important step for both the CDC and the community.

Opa-locka is a low-income community with significant crime and a population that is almost exclusively African-American, black and Hispanic. These demographics are a recipe for obesity: poverty is a barrier to accessing fresh, healthy foods; crime deters adults and, particularly children, from healthy, outdoor exercise; diabetes is disproportionately prevalent among people of color; and Hispanic and African-American traditional diets are heavy with starchy, salty, fatty foods.

Chris Davis, 28, grew up in Opa-locka. After going away to school, he has returned to serve as community organizer for the CDC. To him, the health challenges are evident. Children simply do not play outside like he did.

"There has been a serious decline in play," he said. "I did a lot of biking, went to summer camp as a kid. But that has declined."

Given the area's challenges, Karla Gottlieb, director of community initiatives for the CDC, said she has been struck by the care with which Opa-locka parents nurture their children.

"The parents are very engaged in the lives of their children," she said. "The commitment that you see to parenting children in the face of adversity is really amazing."

And so it is not surprising that, in a high-crime neighborhood, these parents are reluctant to let their children play outdoors.

In response, the CDC began hosting "pop-up parks." Staff would identify a vacant parcel of land, bring in equipment – maybe soccer goals or footballs or even a Wii-type exercise game – and set up a temporary park for the area children. At the end of the day, the equipment was packed up and the "park" disappeared.

The response from neighborhood children and families was positive, Gottlieb said, so the CDC began looking for property that could become a more permanent playground.

Serendipitously, KaBOOM – a national nonprofit that builds and advocates for playgrounds – reached out to Opa-locka and offered to build a playground in the community.

The CDC was able to acquire control of about a half-block section of Magnolia North to become the site of the new playground. In Phase I of the project, the CDC worked on site control and preparation, and recruited about 300 community volunteers to help KaBOOM build the playground.

"It was so many people of all ages, and children. It was amazing," said Gottlieb.

A walking path was included in the design of the space, which today is a mix of lush plantings and brightly colored children's play equipment. Along the side of the space are tables, which enable area residents to gather for conversation or games of dominoes.

With the help of the Florida Blue Foundation, the CDC added lights, both for security and to extend the usable hours of the park.

"We went from rats and roaches to bees and butterflies," said Gottlieb.

Today, the playground is open to all, and is programmed with a host of activities from seed plantings and weeding days for children, to scavenger hunts and a recent "Books and Barbecue" event that featured food and free books for children.

While the playground has been recognized by the National Planning Association as an example of outstanding grass roots initiatives, the CDC is not finished.

It has designs for a walking/fitness trail that would lead users around the perimeter of Magnolia North, with exercise and rest stations strategically placed along the way.

The CDC's interest in health and wellness extends well beyond the park, however. The organization is welcoming a new pediatric clinic into space on the ground floor of its building; this will be the only health care facility in Opa-locka. And Gottlieb says the CDC has incorporated health and wellness into all of its programs as part of its desire to provide a continuum of services to people across all ages and stations.

"You can house people, but if they have a limited education they are going to need additional services, from conception to retirement," she said. "We need to move people to a position where they can sustain the housing and educate their kids and send their kids to college. It's an interdisciplinary approach."

In the meantime, development of the playground has been a boost to the CDC as well as the community.

The playground "gave me credibility," said Davis. "And it helped us move forward on other things."

*Physical activity is an important component for healthy living for Opa-locka children.*

## The Family Christian Association of America

Terry Joseph and Eddie Loyd know as well as anyone the challenges facing the children of Opa-locka. Each of the African-American men experienced his own challenges growing up. And they see first-hand the way circumstances impinge on the daily activities, as well as the potential, of Opa-locka's youngest residents.

"It seems like kids today are prisoners inside the house," Loyd said. "They don't know what the world is about. They just sit inside playing video games."

Joseph and Loyd work with The Family Christian Association of America (FCAA), a nonprofit that serves 300 Opa-locka children through Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and another 100 children in after-school programs at two Opa-locka elementary schools.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, they have integrated health and wellness into their curriculum and created opportunities for children to experience life beyond the neighborhood. In the process, their lives, and the life of their organization, have been changed.

Children in Opa-locka are at high risk for childhood obesity because of demographics. There is limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables in the low-income community, making it harder to find, prepare and eat healthy foods. The traditional diets of African-Americans and Hispanics, who dominate the community, are rich in starchy, salty and fatty foods. And the area's high crime rate discourages outdoor activities, particularly by children.

When community leaders, supported by the Florida Blue Foundation, launched the Childhood Obesity Prevention Project in 2010, Joseph and Loyd knew they wanted FCAA to participate.

"In the scheme of what we do, our project was small," said Joseph. "But when we saw how committed the community was, we really wanted to put a good foot forward."

While Head Start has nutrition and physical activity standards for its programs, FCAA staff enhanced those programs by adding physical fitness testing and expanded physical fitness programs, using the SPARK curriculum, a nationally recognized, evidence-based physical education program.

"We structured their playtime," Joseph said, and injected health and wellness lessons into the Head Start and after-school programs. FCAA required its staff to explain the nutrition benefits of snacks and meals that the children received. They

also invited local chefs in to teach the children about different foods and encourage them to try different tastes.

“The kids go home and say, ‘Hey, Mom, let’s cook some broccoli tonight.’” Loyd said. “The kids learn a lot if you present it to them. And they are going to know how to raise their children one day.”

A diabetic himself, Loyd knows the importance of a healthy lifestyle. He and Joseph also know the importance of broadening one’s experiences and being able to handle oneself in the world.

Joseph grew up in Liberty City, one of Miami-Dade County’s poorest neighborhoods. “Back then, there were whites and there were blacks,” said Joseph, who is black, “and we did our thing and they did theirs. Liberty City was bad, and whites didn’t want to go there. You would never see a white person walking down the street then. Opa-locka is kind of like Liberty City north.”

Through field trips and activities, FCAA exposes its students to the world outside of Opa-locka, whether it is a trip to a museum or to a ball game.

“We get them outside and show them the real world,” Loyd said. “We take them on field trips. We teach them that it’s all about how you carry yourself – if you carry yourself well in this world, you can make it. We want these kids to know that it’s OK to get on a bus and go somewhere – somewhere outside of Opa-locka, see the world.”

In the three years that they worked with the Childhood Obesity Prevention Project, the lessons they shared with the students leaked over into the organization.

Joseph began watching his diet, and lost weight. The organization took a hard look at what it was serving during meetings, and opted for healthier choices – water instead of sodas, for example.

And they changed Loyd’s title, from “Sports” director to “Health and Wellness” director.

“It has been well received,” Joseph said.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*Opa-locka Farmers Market is a place where residents of Opa-locka can buy fresh fruits and vegetables and learn how to prepare them.*

## Florida Farmworker Association

One of the obstacles to providing fresh fruits and vegetables in an urban market such as Opa-locka is sourcing: Where can you get a ready supply of fresh produce?

The members of the Opa-locka Childhood Obesity Prevention Project (COPP) found their answer 45 miles to the south, through a partnership with the Farmworker Association of Florida in Florida City.

The Farmworker Association is a 30-plus-year-old organization that represents more than 8,000 farmworker families across Florida, helping them to develop the leadership and skills needed to avoid exploitation, discrimination and marginalization. For the most part, the organization works only with farmworkers—those who are employed by large commercial agribusinesses—and their families.

But in the Homestead/Florida City area, at the far southern end of Miami-Dade County, the organization has worked hard to develop relationship with Latino farmers who are managing their own small farms and gardens, helping them improve their operations and learn more about accessing markets and resources. Many of these small farmers are growing fruits and vegetables for retail sale; many others have "backyard" farms that generate enough fruits and vegetables for a few families or a small neighborhood.

Opa-locka, located at the northern end of Miami-Dade County, is a far more dense urban environment. In 2011, vegetable gardens were almost non-existent. A dearth of full-service grocery stores in the community meant fresh produce was very hard to come by. That, coupled with other community characteristics, left the children of Opa-locka at a heightened risk of childhood obesity.

The COPP sought to reduce that risk, in part by creating the Opa-locka Farmers Market, a place where residents of Opa-locka could buy fresh fruits and vegetables and learn how to prepare them.

Through community surveys, COPP identified the types of fruits and vegetables that Opa-locka residents were interested in accessing, and began looking for sources to supply the market. With a large Hispanic population, Opa-locka residents' preferences aligned well with the produce being grown by Latino farmers in the southern part of the county. Once COPP connected with the Farmworker Association, both quickly saw how the relationship could be mutually beneficial.

According to Holly Baker, the Farmworker Association's grants coordinator, a collaboration with the Opa-locka Farmers Market not only would put more fresh fruits and vegetables in the hands of Opa-locka families, it also would educate Latino farmers about the merits of locally grown food and would provide some additional income for the Latino farm families.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the Farmworker Association agreed to recruit Latino farmers to supply produce and transport it to the Opa-locka Farmers Market for two years.

The Farmworker Association staff began reaching out to Latino farmers and inviting them to participate. Initially, recruitment was a challenge, said Claudia Gonzalez, community organizer for the Farmworker Association. Some independent Latino farmers, while small, still produced food in quantities too large for the farmers market.

"They wanted to sell us wholesale quantities—whole lots—and they didn't want to break the lots," she said.

So the Farmworker Association also reached out to "backyard farmers"—Latino families that maintain extensive small gardens and have the capacity to grow more produce than they can consume. These farmers were an ideal fit for the Opa-locka project: they could produce appropriate quantities of food and the income from the sales was an important boost to families living on very tight wages.

"It had a great impact because the families had access to more income," Gonzalez said.

The farmers would set the price they wanted at market and Farmworker Association staff would load up the organization's van and make the long drive through Miami-Dade County to the farmers market in Opa-locka.

"There was always so much joy and happiness [when we arrived]," said Elvira Carvajal, Homestead Area Coordinator. "There also was some shock about how much produce there was."

The farmers provided papayas, onions, tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, tomatillos, eggplant, sweet peppers, jalapeño, pumpkin, green beans, zucchini, and sweet corn, Baker said.

"The people were very excited," Gonzalez said. "We participated in some fairs and explained to the children about the different vegetables. They were enthusiastic."

Against this backdrop, the Farmworker Association decided to develop a community garden on land provided by Florida City. The Association already had a small garden at its office that had been developed through a previous project, but the additional land created the opportunity to engage more families in gardening and learning about healthy food.

Today, 28 families maintain beds in the community garden and the Association is building a nursery so they can supply seedlings to the main garden.

"Once the community garden has experienced a few successful growing seasons, if they are able to produce an abundance of produce, the participating families will determine how to market the excess produce to support the sustainability of the garden," Baker said.

And in Opa-locka? The experience with the farmers market in part inspired the COPP to look to develop a food hub as an economic development engine for Opa-locka. Though still in the planning stages, the vision is to create a permanent farmers market and food vendor center, where young people and entrepreneurs can continue to make healthy food and good nutrition an important part of Opa-locka's community culture.


*Student chefs prepare to compete in the Short Chef competition between elementary schools in Opa-locka.*

# The Links, Inc. and The Hispanic Coalition

Slightly more than 1,000 young students walk through the doors of Opa-locka's three elementary schools each day. They are an ideal audience for lessons about good nutrition, healthy eating and active living.

From 2012-2014, a group of women from very different backgrounds worked together to bring these lessons to Opa-locka's students. With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, they exposed the students, and their families, to new ideas and experiences designed to improve their health.

"You've got to start with your children," said Dr. Luvernice Croskey, a family counselor in Opa-locka.

"If you teach them to cook, they will take it home," said Marlene Arribas, president of The Hispanic Coalition. "They [children] have more influence than anything with their parents."

In Opa-locka, high crime, low family incomes and large numbers of people of color are a recipe for obesity. Crime deters adults and, particularly, children from getting outdoor exercise. Research shows that obesity is disproportionately high among people of color. Poverty is one of many barriers to healthy eating and good nutrition.

Croskey is very familiar with Opa-locka; she raised her children there and has seen how the community has changed through the years, not necessarily for the better.

A professional with an active counseling practice, Croskey is a member of The Links, Inc., a national association of professional women of color with three chapters in Miami-Dade County.

"We are women united in friendship and service," said Croskey. "This is my passion – helping people."

At the national level, The Links has a focus on childhood obesity, with an interest in addressing "the multi-dimensional issues that contribute to obesity in African-American children and their families."

In 2012, when Croskey became aware of the Florida Blue Foundation-supported Childhood Obesity Prevention Project in Opa-locka, she immediately saw a fit.

"We saw that Opa-locka was one of the areas that was a food desert," she said, and the three Links chapters came together to be part of the solution.

Their strategy was to work with the three area elementary schools – Nathan B. Young, Golden Glades and Robert Ingram – and provide nutrition education and interactive experiences to students in grades 3-5.

But they quickly realized they needed help – a partner to build bridges between the African-American and Hispanic communities. Opa-locka is a very diverse community and groups can be distrusting of one another. Working through those barriers can be challenging, but is necessary to achieve community-wide goals.

The Links reached out to The Hispanic Coalition, a Miami-based nonprofit that provides an array of services, particularly to immigrant individuals and families.

The Hispanic Coalition had long been sensitive to the health concerns in the Hispanic community, where cultural traditions lean toward a diet of starchy, salty and fatty foods. “In the Cuban community, they just don’t eat vegetables,” said Arribas. When The Links contacted her for help, she quickly said yes.

“That’s how I got involved—they needed Hispanic representation,” she said.

Working in the three schools, the two groups began with nutrition education, bringing a local celebrity called The Short Chef to the schools. The Short Chef (Ray Newlands) engages children in cooking and nutrition with fun and unexpected activities, such as making salad in a plastic kiddie pool and tossing it with oars.

The children not only learn about healthy eating, they begin to understand the science of food, said Karen Landry, whose organization, War on Poverty-Florida, coordinated the Childhood Obesity Prevention Project.

“They learned what kind of combinations work well together,” Landry said. When the Short Chef “forgot” the ground beef for a recipe one day, the children quickly suggested substituting chopped chicken.

While the Short Chef (so named because he wears shorts, not because of his stature) was educating and entertaining the children, the adults knew that the real challenge to healthy eating rested at home.

“The children learned a lot about good food [from the Short Chef],” Arribas said. “The parents … that’s the problem.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to get parents to come out,” Croskey said.

To bridge the gap, the women hosted a Town Hall Meeting at one of the schools, inviting children and their families as well as the mayor, council representatives, community leaders, law enforcement personnel, health care providers and those

who work in parks and recreation. During the meeting, each presenter addressed the role his or her group could play in creating a healthier environment for the children of Opa-locka. The Links then provided a meal and afterward, took the children into the library for stories and games so the parents could participate in workshops on health and nutrition.

But the crowning achievement of the women's efforts was the Iron Short Chef competition, held during the annual health fair.

The health fair, hosted by one of the elementary schools, was a major event, with students and parents from across the community attending. The Links arranged to have a "petting" zoo that featured farm animals to teach the children the source of their food. "One little boy saw a turkey and asked if that was like a Thanksgiving turkey," Arribas recalled. "He had never seen a turkey before."

The Links also invited vendors, such as a company that makes exotic juices from fruits and vegetables, to introduce families to new food options.

But the Iron Short Chef competition was all about the children. Modeled after the television show The Iron Chef, the competition featured teams of "student chefs" from each of the three elementary schools. They were tasked with creating a healthy dish to present to a panel of judges. The students were required to explain how they created their dish and why it was healthy. The judges then sampled the entries and awarded prizes for the best and healthiest creations.

The winners received medals and trophies.

"When they got their medals, they wore them for a week," said Arribas.

The Links also rented a billboard in the heart of Opa-locka to showcase the winning students' pictures. "Just to be a part of something like that did wonders for their self-esteem," said Landry.

As much as the experience benefitted the children, both The Hispanic Coalition and The Links said they benefitted as well. The Hispanic Coalition made connections in Opa-locka that have enabled it to expand its network, Arribas said.

And Croskey said The Links grew as well:

"The experience moved us into another level," she said. "Working with the poverty and obesity issues in our community, it takes a lot of time. We are all volunteering. You have to give so much of yourself and be willing to extend yourself. You have to have a heightened level of commitment. This isn't a little project. You have to see it through to completion."


*Members of the Building a Healthy Parramore Coalition.*

# Parramore

## *Building a Network of Community Resources*

Years ago, the community of Parramore on Orlando's west side was a thriving, middle class, African-American neighborhood. Families played in the area's many lakes and parks, children went to neighborhood schools, businesses provided the amenities and resources the residents needed.

Today, Parramore is but a ghost of its former self. The City of Orlando bills it as "Orlando's highest poverty, highest crime neighborhood." Retail businesses have left: there is no full service grocery and no drug store in Parramore. And, there is no longer any public school in Parramore.

Parramore is a prime example of the way in which place – the built environment – can impact health. A high-crime neighborhood is not conducive to constructive, healthy outdoor activities for children. A neighborhood without major grocers and druggists leaves residents dependent on mom-and-pop corner stores or convenience stores, where fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy choice groceries are seldom found. A neighborhood without a school leaves residents lacking a central place to gather, to learn and to support their children.

Parramore's residents today are plagued with health challenges. "Diabetes is epidemic in this community, heart disease is rampant and black infant mortality is 2.5 times that of whites," said Lynn Nicholson, who manages the Parramore Community Garden. Some would say the community is a breeding ground for childhood obesity, given the limited community knowledge and options for healthy food and exercise.

But many of Parramore's 7,000 residents have decided to fight back. With the help of the Florida Blue Foundation and others, they have built a network of resources that slowly but surely is changing the way that children – and adults— eat and act.

**Parramore's Challenge**

Before community attention began to focus on Parramore in the mid-2000s, 73 percent of the neighborhood children lived in poverty and 43 percent of the adults had neither a high school diploma nor a GED[2].

A series of surveys conducted in 2006-2009[3] showed that 32.3 percent of children living in the Parramore zip code (32805) were overweight and 37.5 percent were

[2] Parramore Kids Zone (http://www.cityoforlando.net/parramorekidzzone/mayors-children-and-education-initiative/)
[3] Surveys sponsored by the Health Council of East Central Florida, the Winter Park Health Foundation and Florida Hospital.

obese, above the rates for all of Orange County and significantly above the desired rates as outlined by Healthy People 2020.

Only 30 percent of those surveyed reported exercising for 30 minutes or more per day, five days a week.

Moreover, the survey revealed a limited level of knowledge about appropriate diet and exercise. More than 57 percent of respondents did not know the recommended number of daily servings of fruits and vegetables, for example.

More recently, a 2015 survey of Orange County high school students shows that roughly 60 percent fail to exercise for 60 minutes or more at least five days a week, 10.9 percent are obese and 15.5 percent are overweight.[4]

“We have had discussions about racism’s impact on the human body,” said Elaine Cauthen, who has worked in Parramore for years.

**A Matter of Trust**

To understand the Parramore of 2015, it is important to understand what has happened in the neighborhood in the past 50 years. It is not a unique story. Sadly, the tale can be told in scores of communities across America.

It begins with construction of superhighways, slicing through minority neighborhoods and leaving behind acres of concrete and noise and broken social networks. Then the residents who can, leave, and the void is filled by those with fewer and fewer resources. With the deteriorating clientele, major businesses leave and the area quickly becomes forgotten to all but social service organizations and the police.

“This is a mecca for homeless individuals,” said Audrey Alexander, a long-time advocate for Parramore and one of those leading the campaign to improve child health. “You can get meals seven days a week here.”

Disinvested landscapes such as Parramore often become locations for civic projects that require large parcels of land but have little connection to the neighborhood. Parramore is now home to the Amway Center, which covers four city blocks and hosts the Orlando Magic NBA team, and the soon-to-be-completed Orlando City Soccer stadium, which will cover two city blocks of the old neighborhood. (The four-city-block Citrus Bowl football stadium, on the western boundary of Parramore, originally was constructed in the 1930s.)

[4] Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2015.

These civic facilities are touted as having economic benefits, but, as one Parramore resident said, "They don't make many jobs and the ones they do make don't pay much." In the meantime, their outsized presence further disrupts social networks and diminishes neighborhood cohesion.

A recent community revitalization plan prepared by the City of Orlando includes plans to return a public school to Parramore and attract a grocery store and farmers market to the area. But residents are skeptical when asked if this is a good thing: "It depends on who you are," said one. "If you are a developer … ."

For a funder entering such a community with the goal of inspiring change, the path to credibility can be very steep. Wisely, the Florida Blue Foundation adopted a grassroots, locally-led strategy. It found people in the community who shared the Foundation's concerns about public health and helped them to be the agents of change in their own community.

"I could get people to do things because they trusted me," said Cauthen, who was with the Health Council of East Central Florida at the time. "I don't live in Parramore but I work in Parramore and I sometimes worship in Parramore. I can go in any church in this community and I know people and they know me. It wouldn't have worked otherwise."

**Building on Strength**

The Florida Blue Foundation did not begin its work with a blank slate. It built on existing community assets and efforts.

In the early 2000s, national funders had focused on the health of Parramore residents with the Get Active Orlando initiative. Get Active Orlando addressed residents' physical activity, tackling projects that would make it easier or more appealing to be outdoors and get exercise in the neighborhood. Organized walking groups and biking groups brought residents together and other projects focused on improving sidewalks and streetscapes. Nutrition was also a part of the programming.

Get Active Orlando provided a good starting point – and it evolved into a city-wide initiative promoting healthy, active living. But, it fell short of driving lasting change among the residents of Parramore. According to a 2009 analysis of the initiative, "[Building] a ribbon of connected concrete does not address other factors, such as stray dogs, people hanging out on street corners or lack of walking destinations."[5]

[5] Get Active Orlando: Changing the Built Environment to Increase Physical Activity, Malisa Mccreedy, AICP, MPA, Jill G. Leslie, MPA, published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine December 2009.

## *Building a Healthy Parramore*

### A call to action to reduce childhood obesity

**Early learning**

Encourage consistent social messaging regarding healthy lifestyle

Promote recommendations to enhance current physical activity and nutritional guidelines for early learning facilities

**Schools**

Implement school policies that increase access to healthy foods and active living

Distribute healthy lifestyle information through school forums, after-school events and evening programs

Develop a referral source for parents of children who receive BMI notifications

**Community and faith-based organizations**

Create community and faith-based alliances that support healthy lifestyle behaviors

Conduct assessments that will build on existing surveys to increase community capacity and infrastructure

Develop a culturally competent childhood obesity educational campaign that addresses the unique needs of the diverse Parramore community

Encourage collaborations within the Haitian community that support healthy living

**Health care providers**

Leverage content expertise of health care providers to develop programs that promote healthy lifestyle behaviors

Increase linkages between medical health care service providers and providers of community-based referral system

**Haitian community**

Determine how Haitian residents desire to receive information on nutrition, grocery shopping, preparing meals and physical activity

Educate community members on nutrition, grocery shopping, preparing meals and physical activity

"Get Active Orlando did serve as a catalyst for change that helped us to establish our initiative," said Cauthen.

In 2009, the Florida Blue Foundation funded the initiative to plant seeds of local change by helping Parramore community leaders develop their own strategy to address community health issues and combat childhood obesity. Through the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, the Foundation brought together four strong community entities—the Health Council of East Central Florida, Hebni Nutrition Consultants, the City of Orlando and the Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention – to lead development of a community plan to reduce the risk of childhood obesity.

For some time, said Cauthen, there had been a lot of players working in Parramore without much cohesion. "There was a need for some kind of central unit to coordinate it," she said. ROCK – Reduce Obesity in Central Florida Kids – became that umbrella organization and the Foundation's funding helped them focus on the needs of Parramore.

"This is not a huge community," Cauthen said. "We had worked here a long time and built a lot of trust. The partners knew that if we said we could do it, we could do it."

**Building the Coalition**

Identifying community partners and building a community-based coalition does not happen overnight; it requires careful, thoughtful and deliberate actions.

Between May 2010 and June 2011, a planning team that included representatives of the Health Council, Hebni Nutrition Consultants, the City of Orlando and the Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention went about the step-by-step process of learning, assembling stakeholders and developing action plans.

They used their networks to identify organizations that could become effective partners and contribute to the development of the community action plan to reduce the risk of childhood obesity. Drawing on those organizations, they conducted stakeholder interviews and focus groups to understand what people in Parramore knew about healthy eating and active living, and what they perceived as the barriers to healthy eating and active living in Parramore.

Work groups were formed and tasked with developing deeper knowledge and specific recommendations to reduce the risk of childhood obesity in four areas:

- Early learning
- Schools

- Community and faith organizations
- Health care providers
- The Haitian community

From the recommendations of these work groups, the call to action was drafted. The goals of the Call to Action were:

- Educate the Parramore community about childhood obesity
- Identify actions needed to build a healthy Parramore
- Build synergy within Parramore through the ROCK Consortium

“Research has shown that the environment in which a child lives plays a very big role in their health. Social and economic conditions must be considered when developing comprehensive strategies to reduce risks that can lead to overweight status in children,” the group wrote in their final report. “The Call to Action plan is the result of a broad community engagement process that brings together the data, community perceptions and knowledge, defined actions and identified strategies.”

**A Network for Change**

In addition to supporting a community-driven plan for action, the Florida Blue Foundation underwrote three rounds of small-dollar grants to help local organizations implement portions of the community plan.

“We spent nights and weekends with folks,” Cauthen said, helping them formalize their program plans and apply for the grants. Ultimately, “the seed money [from the Foundation] enabled organizations to establish a track record and position themselves to apply for funding from other sources.”

It also helped organizations come together and begin to weave a network that would provide long-term community support.

“Until we brought our 15-20 people together, they may have known one anther but they didn’t share [their work],” said Cauthen. “We did a lot of cross pollination.”

While there were about a dozen individual community-based grantees, there was considerable overlap to the work that they did.

The Parramore Community Garden, a mini-grantee, provided gardening resources for other grantees, such as the Bridge to Independence school. Hebni

Nutrition provided the nutrition and cooking lessons for the families who grew food in the community garden.

Such overlays strengthened the network, and, in Cauthen's view, also strengthened the overall impact on Parramore's children.

"We didn't want everyone to go off on their own. We wanted them in partnership. We didn't know the dosage it would take to create change for the kids, but if they are getting it [the message] from lots of different learning settings, it is more likely to take."

And there are many signs that change has taken root.

"We have seen local policy changes in day care, churches and schools and with individuals," Cauthen said. "The day care centers got refrigerators so they could store breast milk, and changed to healthier snacks for the children. The local grocer reorganized his store so fresh produce is at the front and soda and snacks at the rear of the store.

"A lot of the progress we started, even though our funding has ended, it continues."


*Parramore Community Garden, established and maintained by residents of Parramore, is an active community garden shared by individuals and community organizations.*

# Parramore Community Garden

The foundation of healthy eating is fresh food, particularly fruits and vegetables. But, in a hard-surface urban environment, it can be difficult to find open land on which to grow fresh food.

That was the challenge in Parramore, a low-income urban community on Orlando's west side where neighborhoods have been overtaken by highways, municipal arenas and sports stadiums.

But since 2008, with the help of the Florida Blue Foundation, the City of Orlando and others, residents of Parramore have established and maintained an active community garden shared by individuals and community organizations.

Having a vibrant garden is critical in a neighborhood such as Parramore. The community has no full-service grocery store. The local mom-and-pop or convenience stores that dot the neighborhood tend to prioritize snacks and processed foods, with limited, if any, fresh foods for sale.

"There was no fresh food available," said Audrey Alexander, who in 2008-2009 was working with the City of Orlando's Get Active Orlando initiative promoting healthy lifestyles.

To spur development of a community garden, the City made available two small lots in a residential area of Parramore and the Parramore Community Garden was born.

Lynn Nicholson, who manages the community garden, recalls the early challenges.

"They gave us the lots but they weren't cleared," he said. "There was a lot of debris on them that we had to remove. The soil was tested for contamination and was cleared. We had to install a security fence all around the property."

The community volunteers also needed tools, including a tiller, and a storage shed, but they persevered.

To allay concerns about soil quality, they built raised beds, which allowed control of soil and fertilizers, and minimized weeds. Today, the garden includes 19 beds—10 that are 8 feet by 12 feet, and nine that are 8 feet by 14 feet.

Each bed is "owned" by an individual, family or group that is responsible for planting and caring for the bed and receives all of its produce. Bed "owners" include an area school and Orlando City Commissioner Regina Hill, who represents the Parramore neighborhood.

"If you lived in Parramore, you were first in line [to get a bed]," Nicholson said. "Lots of people from Parramore have farming backgrounds."

Nicholson has proved the ideal manager for the garden. A native of Tennessee, he grew up with a gardening father.

"He was the smartest man I know," Nicholson said. "He knew everything about nature. I talk to these people now who have been to school and learned all these things about agriculture and they still don't understand nature the way my father did. This [the community garden] was easy for me."

At age 72, Nicholson is healthy, fit and trim: "I don't take any medicines. The garden keeps me in shape."

The garden gives the bed owners a workout, too, Nicholson said.

"It's hard to hold the enthusiasm of some because it's hard work," he said. Consequently, there is some turnover among bed owners periodically.

The garden is open 10 months a year – from September through June. In Florida, the gardening calendar is somewhat untraditional, as the extreme heat in July and August tends to overwhelm plants. "You should be here in December and January, when things are really blooming," Nicholson said.

The garden operates on an annual budget of about $12,000-$15,000, which covers the cost of seeds and plants, soils, fertilizer ("We use mushroom compost from Mount Dora"), property maintenance and modest compensation for Nicholson.

The garden has been a terrific tool to teach children about nutrition, food sourcing and healthy eating. Students from a nearby school maintain a bed, as do children who participate in Parramore Kids Zone, a city-operated initiative that provides education, health and recreational programs for Parramore children from birth through college or career.

"It's something to see a little 4-year-old trying to handle a hoe," Nicholson said. "I just love watching the children. They see the seeds germinate—I just love watching their faces."

And the garden does more than just teach. It provides healthy food – not only for the bed owners but also for others in the community.

"I'm a single person," said Alexander, who has a bed in the garden. "I can't eat all of the produce so I just give it away."

In addition to the produce grown in the individual beds, Nicholson has planted fruit trees in the garden—banana, papaya, fig, pineapple and avocado. “We have gotten bananas; the figs are slow and we got two pineapples,” he said.

And their success has spread.

Nicholson was asked to work with students at Mt. Sinai Junior Academy, a Seventh Day Adventist school just outside of Parramore, to develop their own 25-bed garden.

In 2011, the Parramore garden was named Community Garden of the Year by the Keep Orlando Beautiful board and it received a Golden Brick Award from the Downtown Orlando Partnership, which recognizes community development projects that benefit downtown Orlando.

And the garden is a popular stop for politicians.

“People are always taking pictures there,” Nicholson said. “The mayor often uses the garden for interviews and photographs.”


*Produce from the garden at New Image Youth Center is used in the nutrition program and to teach children cooking skills.*

## New Image Youth Center

A decade ago, Shanta Barton Stubbs was a 21-year-old college graduate spending time with her father, a pastor who had just moved his church from Winter Park to the Parramore neighborhood in west Orlando. She was working inside the building one night and heard a commotion outside. She looked out and there were children playing in the street.

“It was 2 or 3 in the morning,” recalled Tiffany Davis, Stubbs’ childhood friend. “She went out to ask them what they were doing and invited them inside the church to play.”

Thus began the New Image Youth Center, now a center of health, education and hope located in a series of shotgun storefronts in the heart of Parramore. The Center serves about 85 young people, ages 5 to 25.

“All it took was an able body and someone who was willing,” Stubbs said.

The children who walk through the New Image front door live in difficult circumstances. Parramore is a high-crime neighborhood with few resources – no full-service grocery store, not even a public school.

Inevitably, Davis said, conversations with the young people come around to food.

“Some of the kids might slide up to me and let me know that they do not have any food at home,” said Davis, who serves as the on-site manager, bookkeeper, teacher and coach for the program (though her official title is simply “treasurer”).

The Center maintains a small food pantry to help out the children’s families in tough times. But Davis and Stubbs both acknowledge it takes more than canned goods to raise a healthy child.

For the past several years, the children at the Center have established and maintained their own garden, with support from the Florida Blue Foundation’s Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative.

Planted in raised beds in a paved parking lot behind the Center, the garden produces strawberries, collards, carrots, squash, peas, peppers and tomatoes.

Some of the produce is used in the Center’s nutrition program, which teaches the children cooking skills in the kitchen that is shared with the neighboring church. But much of the food from the garden is shared with the children’s families and others in need in the community.

The Center's focus is helping young people achieve academic, social and physical well-being, and while much attention is paid to the academic success of the Center's youth, Davis argues that physical well-being is equally important.

"We are fighting for the lives of our children," she said. "How can we teach them with books if we don't teach them to be healthy?"

Davis recalled one student—a third grade girl—who was very large. After participating in nutrition classes at the Center, she took the new ideas home and convinced her mother to change their diet. The girl started riding a bicycle, learned to skateboard, and, in time, lost weight. "She's a big girl, she's never going to be skinny," Davis said, "but she is much healthier."

The Foundation's support also underwrote dance classes, and the Center has renovated part of its space into a dance studio, complete with mirrored wall.

The activity agenda doesn't end there. New Image has organized biking groups for its members, walking clubs (one donor provided pedometers) and yoga classes.

But it is the garden that provides so much satisfaction to the children.

"They love the fact that it is something that they have done," Davis said. "They have become the teachers, instructing guests and their family members and newcomers in the proper care of the garden. They've learned how to do everything from A-Z—from cleaning out the irrigation pipes to whatever."

As often happens, those who serve have been transformed as much as those who are served.

Davis and Stubbs became friends as young teens, so when Stubbs called and said she needed help with the fledgling program, Davis said yes.

"I was recovering from a back injury. I was doing absolutely nothing and living on pain medication," she said. "Then Shanta called."

Within a month she was teaching pre-school boys how to recognize their numbers, letters and colors.

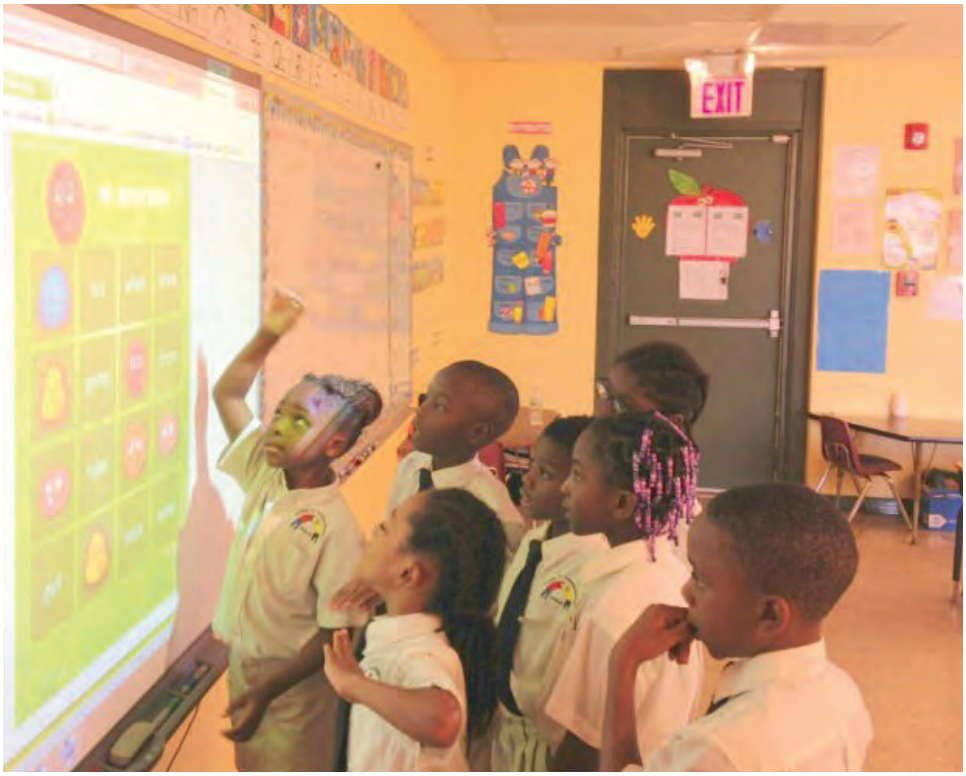
"I found out that my life isn't about me," Davis said. "If I can help one, I can help another, and if I can get two on my team, there are others coming."

Stubbs voices a similar optimism.

"People always ask me where I see all of this in five years. I don't think about that. I think about what I need to do today, and tomorrow, there will be something else I need to do and I will do that."

Whatever tomorrow brings, both women know that they will hold fast to the lessons of healthy food and healthy living that they share with the children.

“We have adopted it as a lifestyle,” Davis said. “We have pushed our healthy eating program to the point it is permanent. Even though the Foundation grant has ended, we are not letting go.”




*Bridge to Independence school promotes healthy eating and nutrition through nutrition classes and improved choices at lunch time.*

## Bridge to Independence

After graduating from Bethune-Cookman University, Nicole Hollis returned to her home town of Orlando and started a school for children with special needs. Her experiences there made her think:

“I saw the benefits of IEPs [individual education plans] and extra time for testing with special needs students and I thought of all of those other students who struggle but somehow fall through the cracks in the public school system,” she said. “I thought maybe they could benefit from a slower pace or smaller classes or different learning approach.”

In the fall of 2003, she opened Bridge To Independence, a private school for low-income children that features small classes and individualized learning. Funding comes primarily through Step Up for Students, a state-authorized program that uses corporate contributions to provide scholarships enabling low-income students to attend the school of their choice.

The school was located in Parramore, an extremely low-income neighborhood in west Orlando. The first year, there were 11 children.

Today, the school has 110 students in grades K-12 and has moved to a more expansive campus just outside of Parramore.

As the school has grown, Hollis said, so has its emphasis on healthy lifestyles and healthy eating.

“When we were in Parramore,” Hollis said, “there definitely were more nutrition challenges because it was a food desert. We had a summer health and fitness program for more than 100 students.”

With funding from the Florida Blue Foundation, Bridge To Independence expanded its physical education program from two to five days a week – and it has been able to sustain that program.

“We have cheerleading, basketball and playground activities for the younger kids,” Hollis said.

Foundation funds also helped the school promote healthy eating and nutrition with the children, through nutrition classes and improved choices at lunch time.

The school started and maintains a bed at the Parramore Community Garden.

“One of our teachers oversees the garden and the students help out,” Hollis said. “We use the produce for holiday meals and as gifts to our families.”

The garden also becomes a laboratory for science classes, she said.

The emphasis on nutrition and athletics has paid off for the students, Hollis said, recalling that one student lost more than 100 pounds through changes in diet and exercise.

“We taught them that the ugly, yucky foods actually taste good.”

Parents tell her that the nutrition education and experiences are making a difference. “They say, ‘I didn’t think they liked vegetables but they are eating them.’”

The emphasis on health and nutrition “keeps a balance for our kids,” Hollis said. “Even with the school lunch program, everything is healthy.”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*Video, in Creole, that addresses the challenges and demonstrates better ways to shop and prepare a traditional Creole diet.*

# Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention

In Haiti, a family sits down to a big meal of pork with rice, fried plantains and other calorie-laden foods and the negative health effects can be minimal. But when that same family comes to the United States and prepares the same meal in the same quantities, the negative health effects can be significant, for adults and for children.

The difference is not the food, it is individual behavior – behavior that is shaped by the culture of place.

The Center for Multicultural Wellness and Prevention has spent the last three years helping immigrant Haitian families in the Parramore neighborhood of west Orlando understand how culture and diet affect their health, and how they can adopt healthier strategies without losing their long-held traditions.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the Center launched Konesans – a three-phase project to help Parramore's growing Haitian population adopt a healthier diet and a healthier lifestyle.

To date, their efforts have found an eager audience, and have begun to prompt important changes in the community.

**The Haitian View**

A video produced by the Center aimed at Haitian audiences opens with a close-up photo of a middle-aged man's bulging belly, his unbuttoned shirt revealing wisps of graying hair and a protruding navel.

"That is a status symbol in Haiti," explains Jean Garcon, the Center's Housing Director. "It shows prosperity."

And the Haitian diet – packed with greasy foods, and lots of rich and fried foods – supports such a physique. But it works in Haiti, Garcon said.

"In Haiti, people can eat these foods and stay healthy because there is no transportation; they must walk everywhere. They get exercise. There are fruits on the trees—they just pick them and eat them. And the children are outdoors playing.

"But when they come to America, there is transportation, so they do not walk anymore. They do not like to 'exercise.' Fruits are not readily available. There are many high-sugar drinks.

"And in America, children who are outdoors hanging out in the park are thought to be vagabonds. Parents do not want their children hanging out in the park. A 'good' Haitian child stays at home."

Shifting both the Haitian outlook and the Haitian way of life in America is the Center's goal.

"The health of the community is our number one priority," Garcon said. "Health is not just about one problem. When there is poor health, there are a lot of things not working in that person's life."

**Addressing the Challenge**

The Center has spent two decades providing an array of health and related services to Haitian, African-American and Caribbean residents in Central Florida. It has offices in Mount Dora and Kissimmee but its main office is on the outskirts of Parramore.

Though hard data is limited, evidence suggests that the number of Haitian-born residents in Parramore is growing. Like many immigrant groups, they face unique health challenges fueled in part by the language barriers.

Staff at the Center speaks four languages – English, French, Creole and Spanish – positioning them ideally to help these newcomers navigate the transition from one culture to another.

Konesans is the Haitian Creole word for knowledge.

"Everything we do is based in knowledge," said Dr. Marie Francois, chief executive and founder of the Center.

During the first phase of Konesans, staff at the Center conducted an assessment of Haitian and African-American youth in the Parramore area, with a particular focus on their diet. They held small focus groups and larger forums to listen to the teens and learn about their behaviors and habits.

What they learned confirmed their suspicions: young people were not making good choices about food and drink, in part through lack of knowledge and in part through lack of opportunity. Even if the young people wanted to choose healthier foods, the stores available in their neighborhoods presented very few, if any, options.

During the second phase of Konesans, the Center's team focused on in-person nutrition education. They met with small groups and provided education in smarter methods of food preparation and how to make traditional meals with fewer calories and less salt and fat.

These sessions were effective, but questions of scale quickly surfaced. Were there ways to reach more people more effectively?

In phase three, the Center worked with a Creole television production company to create a two-part video, in Creole, that addresses the challenges and demonstrates better ways to shop and prepare a traditional Creole diet.

The video is a polished and slick production featuring a female Creole television personality whose trim figure bears witness to what a healthy diet can achieve. The message is clear: keep traditions but make them healthier. Use the right oils. Exercise portion control. Keep lots of color on your plate. Use lower-fat meats—ground turkey instead of beef. Bake rather than fry.

They market their cause through schools, churches and on the radio.

“You go where they are,” Dr. Francois said. “There’s a difference between outreach and reaching out.”

The sessions are well-received. “We are overrun with questions,” she said. “There is an eagerness to learn and understand. We may start at 9 p.m. and not leave until 11:30.”

In addition to encouraging new habits in food preparation, the sessions encourage new habits in shopping: buy water instead of sodas.

“Even here in our offices we have changed,” Dr. Francois said. “When we have meetings we offer water and not soda.”

Gradually, she said, the local markets are changing as shoppers make new requests and demand begins to shift. At Jack’s Caribbean & American Market, the primary Haitian market in the area, produce has been moved to a more prominent location.

In addition to encouraging better health choices, Center staff spread a message of responsibility. In their view, individuals must accept greater responsibility for their own health.

“Here [in the U.S.], we focus a lot on treatment and not so much on prevention,” said Dr. Francois. “People go to a doctor and they expect a miracle. But nobody explains to them *their* part in being healthy.”


*MicheLee Puppets puppeteer.*

## MicheLee Puppets

In the right hands, an ordinary sock and a well-worn fairy tale can be effective tools in the fight against childhood obesity.

Those hands belong to Tracey Conner and the staffers of MicheLee Puppets, which develops and delivers “issue-based puppet shows.”

One of MicheLee’s three primary topics is health, wellness and childhood obesity prevention, making MicheLee a natural partner for organizations in Orlando’s Parramore community working to reduce the risk of childhood obesity. With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation’s Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, MicheLee has worked with a half-dozen Parramore-based organizations, bringing lessons about nutrition and healthy living to the neighborhood’s young people.

“MicheLee added something that I think has remained with our students,” said Tiffany Davis of Parramore’s New Image Youth Center. “As I watch them embrace our Healthy Living Program, I know that they remember the healthy eating habits that they learned” with MicheLee.

MicheLee, which is based about eight miles from the Parramore neighborhood, has been creating and presenting its puppet shows across Florida for 30 years. Born out of Conner’s love of theater, MicheLee first focused on issues of disability. Through the years, the staff has developed programming to address bullying, literacy, domestic violence and other timely topics.

“All of our programs are designed to help children make good decisions, take responsibility for their own actions and show respect for self and others,” said Conner. “Everything is grounded in those three values.”

When they first began their work in Parramore, Conner said, MicheLee worked with schools and community centers to present “Extreme Health Challenge,” a puppet show that is mix of game show and reality show.

“We use the puppets to engage the people in the audience in quizzes and activities,” Conner said. In the process, they learn about healthy foods, how to read a nutrition label, how to pack a healthy lunch and so forth.

Teachers/leaders then are provided with follow-up activity guides and videos to use in class, and the organization is given posters and other tools to keep the characters and messages from the show “alive” for the students.

“We had some real successes with that,” Conner said. “In one school, the children came back to class and one read the label on chocolate milk and noticed

how much sugar it contained. The class then made a pact that they would only order white milk from then on."

While that was a great success, Conner said, it didn't go far enough.

"We weren't reaching the families," Conner said. "The kids might learn the lesson but the parents weren't impacted."

So, MicheLee changed its approach.

Instead of presenting puppet shows to the children, MicheLee turned the tables and had the children create and present the puppet shows to their friends and family.

MicheLee staff would work with an organization over an eight-week period, first teaching the children basic lessons about nutrition and healthy living.

"We use the Nemours '5-2-1-almost none' lessons," Conner said, which teach 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily, 2 hours or less of screen time daily, 1 hour of exercise daily and almost no sweetened beverages, such as sodas or sports drinks.

With those lessons under their belts, the children moved on to puppetry, creating their own sock puppets.

"With a sock and a couple of ties to create the head and the body, you can make the basic puppet," Conner said. "Then you can add on arms and facial features and hair and clothing and create the character. We then add the rods that control the body and arms and teach the kids how to manipulate them."

The children must do more than create the puppets, however. They must write their own script. MicheLee encourages the use of what Conner calls "fractured fairy tales" – fairy tales that are familiar to the children but with a different twist.

"Cinderella might go to a race rather than a ball, and she might lose her tennis shoe instead of her slipper. The tortoise eats healthy food but the hare eats junk food. The three little pigs' houses might be built of candy, junk food and fruits and vegetables."

For Conner, success occurs "when they are actually taking the concepts and putting them into their own words."

MicheLee also helps the children learn to voice their puppets – learning and reading their lines and creating character with their voices. And they must stage the show, creating the backdrops, props and other devices needed to tell the story.

Having responsibility for the project adds an important dimension to student learning, said Davis of the New Image Youth Center, which had about 20 students, grades K-5, participate in the puppet show.

"It seemed to me that the best part of the MicheLee Puppets experience was the students knowing that they had to actually put on a show for other people. This made them put forth the effort that it would take for them to make the show a hit."

While the children think they are learning about puppets, they also are learning a host of other lessons: teamwork, problem solving, comprehensive planning and leadership, for example.

At New Covenant Baptist Church, for example, two boys did not really connect to the program until they were given responsibility for some of the technology, Conner said. "It was a great experience for these children to recognize the different talents and gifts exhibited by their teammates," Conner noted.

The program also "gives the kids a creative way to communicate, using storytelling and art to advocate for a cause," said Conner. "And it teaches them about advocacy—about the need to share something with others to help the community improve."

Once the show is developed, family and friends are invited to an assembly to watch the production.

MicheLee worked with New Image Youth Center and Callahan Community Center in concert. For that production, about 150 individuals filled the community center auditorium.

For one of the New Image students, it was a particularly powerful moment. The boy, who had struggled with reading, had chosen the role of the Big Bad Wolf in the fractured Three Little Pigs. He had practiced hard, made great strides in voicing his character, and was excited about performing. On the day of the performance, there was a shooting in his neighborhood and his building was cordoned off: no one could go in and no one could go out. In a panic, his colleagues scrambled to fill his role. But just before curtain time, the boy arrived: he had found a way to sneak out of his building and make his way to the community center. He performed his role with aplomb and received cheers from the audience.

"Our students loved doing the puppet show," Davis said. "It brought healthy eating to a level that the students could truly understand."


*Fresh produce displayed on the Fresh Stop mobile farmers market.*

# Hebni Nutrition Consultants

From a nondescript, one-story building in the shadow of the Citrus Bowl, a small group of people is transforming the nutrition landscape in the low-income Orlando neighborhood of Parramore.

The group teaches nutrition classes. They counsel those who want to lose weight. They coach patients fighting diabetes. They teach children about healthy eating. They help local grocers provide healthier food choices for their customers. They even have transformed a city bus into a mobile farmers market that travels downtown Orlando five days a week.

Hebni Nutrition Consultants, Inc. has spent the past 20 years trying to improve nutrition for people of color, not only by educating minorities, but also by educating whites as well.

“We need to teach our white counterparts how to reach minorities,” said Fabiola Gaines, one of Hebni’s founders.

Their strategy is to provide information that people can easily use.

“If we can’t show you how to do it, we aren’t being very impactful,” said Glen Providence, who serves as director of business development for Hebni.

While much of their work has received national recognition, it is their work in Parramore that shows the depth of their commitment, and has attracted the support of the Florida Blue Foundation’s efforts to combat childhood obesity.

**Changing the Message**

Hebni Nutrition (Hebni is pronounced “Ebni” – the “H” is silent – and comes from the Egyptian word for “ebony”) is the brainchild of three African-American dieticians who met years ago and recognized that white health care professionals were not communicating effectively with African-American patients.

The food pyramid then in use by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to define a healthy diet did not include foods that were part of the typical African-American diet.

“If you had diabetes and the dietician came in and told you to eat asparagus instead of collards, you weren’t going to do it,” explained Providence. “No one was doing targeted nutrition education to communities of color.”

So, Hebni’s founders – Ellareetha Carson, Roniece Weaver and Gaines – created the Soul Food Pyramid. It was based on the same nutritional guidelines as the

traditional food pyramid but referenced items such as cornbread, collards, turnip greens, chitterlings, fat back, hog jowl and streak-o-lean.

The three pooled their money and had the first copies of the Soul Food Pyramid printed in 1996. Since then, more than 3 million copies have been sold and millions more given away, Providence said.

Working out of a spare bedroom, the women wrote books – *Slim Down Sister*, a diet and exercise guide for African-American women (2001) and *The New Soul Food Cookbook for People with Diabetes*, in collaboration with the American Diabetes Association (2006). And when the USDA shifted from the food pyramid to the food plate as a guide for healthy eating, Hebni's founders responded with the Soul Food Plate, again referencing foods familiar to African-Americans.

**Connecting with the Community**

In 2009, the three established their Parramore office in the small building that once was a bookstore. With the help of Community Development Block Grant funds, the building was renovated to include two state-of-the-art kitchens with as much style and design as any set on the Food Network.

On one side, black stone counters and smart backsplashes surround commercial ovens and dual commercial cooktops, with professional exhaust hoods. On the other side, a more traditional kitchen features household appliances and handsome wood-fronted cabinets. The space allows Hebni staff to test, and validate recipes, photograph food, video cooking lessons and teach nutrition classes.

Their first community program was the Oasis Project, begun in 2010 and supported in part by the Florida Blue Foundation.

Oasis is an eight-week program (classes meet once a week) that provides nutrition education and food preparation/shopping education to about 10-20 individuals at a time. There is no charge.

During the first meeting, participants are assessed for weight, cholesterol, BMI and other health measures.

"We often find folks with undiagnosed diabetes," Providence said, "and work with them to get follow-up care."

The next seven weeks are spent educating participants about smart shopping and reading nutrition labels, demonstrating healthy recipes and teaching healthy meal preparation.

At the end of eight weeks, participants are re-assessed and there are additional follow-ups at one-month, two-month and three-month intervals, with a final health assessment conducted during the last follow-up.

“We have seen some incredible results,” Providence said. “One person lost 40 pounds.”

All of the participants are volunteers: “We recruited for the first class,” Providence said. “We haven’t had to recruit since then. It’s word of mouth. People just show up.”

The return rate for participants after the first class is about 90 percent, Providence said, and Hebni uses incentives to keep people engaged throughout the eight weeks – small giveaways such as measuring spoons, portion control plates and “spoonulas,” a serving utensil that helps control portion size.

The Hebni staff also provides nutrition classes for children – students from the Parramore Kids Zone, a city-operated series of programs, and from schools such as Bridge To Independence.

And then there are the folks who just walk in the door.

“One woman came in the door one day,” recalled Gaines,” and said, ‘I am tired of being fat. They told me you could help me.’ We taught her about nutrition and the problems with her food choices and we helped her develop a healthier diet. She lost a lot of weight.”

Another walk-in needed health care support.

“We had a woman come in the door who lives across the street,” Gaines said.

“Her husband had been diagnosed with diabetes. She didn’t understand what she was supposed to do. We were able to sit with her in a relaxed setting and explain to her what was going on with her husband’s body and why and how the diet changes could help.

“The doctor gives you 10 minutes of his time to address your needs. A lot of folks don’t understand the doctor’s diet instructions—especially those being exposed to diabetes-related issues for the first time. We fill the gap between what your doctor tells you to do and what you really need to do.”

**Improved Grocery Choices**

From the outside, Sunlife Grocery on Parramore Avenue looks like any other mom-and-pop convenience store in a tough urban neighborhood – gritty exterior, bars on the windows and doors, folks hanging out around the entrance.

But inside, the first things you see are bottled water and the produce section. Along the wall is a new refrigerated unit that houses dairy and frozen foods – including bulk frozen fresh vegetables such as corn and peas. Sodas and snack foods are in the very last aisle.

Sunlife's healthier inventory is the result of a collaboration between Hebni, the Florida Blue Foundation and the store's owner, Meharie Negussie.

As Hebni staff evaluated food options in the Parramore community, they recognized the limited choices available to residents – especially those without easy access to transportation. There is no full-service grocery in Parramore and most residents must rely on shops like Sunlife for their daily groceries.

With funding from the Foundation, Hebni staff helped Negussie replace the aging floor and ceiling in his store and install updated signage and the refrigeration unit. They then convinced Negussie to reorganize all of the inventory in the store and place healthier items in the front and less healthy items in the back.

The Foundation funding also underwrote some inventory costs for the first several weeks, as Negussie got a handle on customer demand and learned to pace his orders.

Negussie is committed to his community, Providence said. "He keeps a black and white composition book under the counter and he will give his customers credit – but only for healthy things that they need. He won't give you credit for beer or junk food. But if a mom is in there buying milk and cereal for her kids, and she's a little short, he will just write it down. And you know what? People come back and pay. They really do."

**Fresh Stop**

The experience at Sunlife prompted Hebni staff to think about ways they could extend their impact. Not all store owners were as willing to change as Negussie. How could they make healthy foods more readily available?

They learned of a mobile grocery store being used in New Orleans and took the idea to John Lewis Jr., CEO of LYNX, Orlando's public transit system. "I'm in," Lewis told them, halfway through the conversation. "What do you want?"

"A bus," the Hebni team said.

With the support of LYNX, the Florida Blue Foundation and others, the Fresh Stop Bus began service January 2015.

The brightly colored city bus has chilled racks and coolers in place of seats. Bins are filled with potatoes, corn, garlic, onions, bananas, yams, grapes, melons, mangos, apples and more. Berries are stacked in the cooler. Customers enter the doors at the front of the bus, walk down the aisle and make their selections, then pay and exit through the rear doors of the bus.

The bus stocks up each morning at the Hebni offices, with its produce inventory coming from Second Harvest. Each day it visits different areas – some in Orlando's low-income neighborhoods and some in places, such as City Hall, where business will be brisk and public relations impact high.

"We must try to use the bus for some revenue generation," Providence said.

Once a month, the bus visits a Title 1 elementary school, and Hebni staff conducts nutrition classes for the children, makes and shares smoothies and gives away produce. "We try to do that on a Friday so the kids have something healthy over the weekend," Providence said.

**On the Horizon**

Gaines, Providence and their colleagues are not content to be still.

"We must constantly look to re-invent ourselves," Providence said. "We have done a great job getting information out. Now we need to build on that and expand our reach."

Gaines is thinking a bit farther ahead, to the day when she and her colleagues will retire. She is now 63, founder Carson is 80 and founder Weaver is in her mid-50s. Gaines worries about who will be the next generation of leaders.

"It takes someone with vision and passion, someone who is willing to work for a modest salary," she said. "And it takes a person who is like the person that you want to teach."

*Residents of Sulphur Springs participate in a community meeting.*

# Sulphur Springs

## *Rediscovering a Tradition of Good Health*

Tucked between the Busch Gardens amusement park, Interstate 275 and the Hillsborough River is the small community of Sulphur Springs. Though it is just five miles north of downtown Tampa, it is a world away.

The median household income in Sulphur Springs is $22,997 (2013) – almost half that in Tampa. One out of four Sulphur Springs households earns less than $10,000. The unemployment rate is 35 percent. Crime is high. There are no full-service grocery stores or pharmacies, only two convenience stores and one local meat market with a very limited selection.

Like many low-income neighborhoods, Sulphur Springs lacks most of the attributes of a "healthy community." Consequently, its children are at great risk of childhood obesity.

But with the help of the Florida Blue Foundation, a host of community organizations are working to improve the odds for Sulphur Springs' children. More families are walking and gardening, children are learning the basics of nutrition, and the community is beginning to acknowledge the merits of a home-cooked meal and an active lifestyle.

"I know that we have definitely changed lives," said Saima Qadree, who has been instrumental in leading the Florida Blue Foundation Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative in Sulphur Springs. "We have given them the tools."

### *A Place with its Origins in Good Health*

Given its history, it is ironic that Sulphur Springs today finds itself in such an unhealthy condition.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sulphur Springs was a place of wellness and healing. The natural mineral springs in the area fed pools where tourists and locals would gather to escape the heat and bathe in the healthy waters. In 1927, a developer built a 241-foot tower along the banks of the Hillsborough River near the springs. It became a landmark on the western end of a 1/2-mile riverfront park, with a gazebo and the springs and pool on the eastern end.

But in the 1960s, the interstate sliced through the riverfront park. Today, the tower sits on the west side of Interstate 275; the springs and the remains of the Sulphur Springs neighborhood are on the east side. The original pool is a black, murky, fenced-off hole adjacent to a new community swimming pool.

The proximity of the interstate and the bisecting of the neighborhood sent property values plummeting and upended the demographics of the community. Today's Sulphur Springs is small and walkable enough to be a cohesive neighborhood, but it is challenged by high mobility, high crime and a populace with very limited resources.

All of this plays out in risks for children's health in multiple ways:

Lower income families have greater difficulty accessing healthy foods—typically, low-income families look for calorie-dense foods that are filling but less expensive. The lack of grocery stores means a lack of easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Unsafe streets mean there are fewer safe outdoor places for children to play. And transient families are less likely to build the community connections and networks that are important for healthy family life.

Still, long-time residents see great promise in Sulphur Springs. "It is a bit of the country in the city," said Norma Robinson, who, with her husband, retired to the community in 1997. "It is the type of atmosphere where people know each other – even though there is transience, there are people who have been here for years."

**Anchoring Change at the Neighborhood School**

Located almost at the geographic center of Sulphur Springs is Sulphur Springs Community School—a K-8 Hillsborough County public school. In many respects, the school has become the center of community life for the neighborhood.

In the 2008-2009 school year, the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA, recognizing the deep needs of children in Sulphur Springs, decided to try a new series of program offerings: a "YMCA without walls." Instead of occupying its own building, the Y decided to place staff inside the Sulphur Springs school (then an elementary school) and offer low-cost after-school programs—$36 per child for the entire school year.

"That first year, we had a handful of children," said Qadree, who was on the Y staff at the time.

The next year, the Y's efforts received a boost from the Florida Blue Foundation, which asked the Y to serve as the lead agency for the Foundation's Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative to reduce the risks of childhood obesity in Sulphur Springs. With the Foundation's support, the Y led creation of the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids (CHSSK) coalition.

Building the coalition and setting its priorities was a careful and deliberate process, Qadree said, noting that Sulphur Springs' residents have a deep skepticism of newcomers. This stems from a long history of organizations and

individuals coming into Sulphur Springs to "do to" the community rather than "do with" the community. Sulphur Springs residents assume, based on past experience, that outsiders who come into the community will be there a short time and then leave.

"When I first started, people wouldn't talk to me," Qadree said. "It took about seven months before people began to accept me. You earn a positive response by sticking around."

Indeed, long-time resident Robinson was a bit skeptical at first. "I looked at what the Foundation had done [in other communities] and I thought the presentation in Sulphur Springs would have to be a little different."

Sulphur Springs had a strong neighborhood association – Robinson and her husband had been active members since they arrived in the community. To build credibility and engage the community, the CHSSK coalition partnered with the association and asked residents to design a survey about individual health habits. Forty volunteers then were recruited and trained to go door-to-door and solicit residents to participate in the survey.

Through that carefully orchestrated "listening" process, the coalition identified six areas of priority concern:

- Food and nutrition
- Community outreach
- Child care, youth and families
- Healthy living
- Access to care
- Safety, access and community pride.

Separate work groups then addressed each priority area, conducting additional research, hosting focus groups and listening to community concerns, before identifying their specific recommendations for the community call to action.

Throughout this work, Qadree said, the Y developed important community partnerships. With Florida Blue Foundation's support, the coalition awarded "mini-grants" to community-based organizations to begin providing new services to the children of Sulphur Springs.

## Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids

**Food and Nutrition Goal**

Increase healthy food options within the community

- Community gardens
- Healthy cooking classes
- Farmers markets
- Food bank services

**Community Outreach Goal**

Increase opportunities for resident engagement

- Communications strategy
- Volunteer improvement plan

**Safety Access and Community Pride Goal**

Improve neighborhood health and safety

- Access to safe play spaces
- Community beautification projects
- Pedestrian safety
- Home health inspections

**Healthy Living Goal**

Promote community health education

- Community health workers
- Healthy eating and active living programs
- Community health directory and literature

**Child Care, Youth and Families Goal**

Increase healthy eating and active living for children and families

- Child care and school-based programs
- Organized sports and community activities
- Family education
- Community partnerships

**Access to Care Goal**

Ensure a medical home for children and families

- Health care delivery partnerships
- Health benefits and eligibility workshops

"Our work with the mini-grantees really allowed us to make a deeper impact here because our students didn't have access to those services," Qadree said. "Partnership is really at the heart of what we do in Sulphur Springs."

As the CHSSK coalition grew, other resources came to the community.

United Way Suncoast opened the Sulphur Springs Resource Center, which provides adult education and workforce training. It is located across the street from the school.

The City of Tampa began a housing rehabilitation initiative to demolish vacant and abandoned properties and improve the housing stock of Sulphur Springs.

The Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System established a small branch library inside the school's media center.

And throughout it all, a broad-based group of community leaders and organizations was establishing and building Sulphur Springs Neighborhood of Promise, a holistic, academic-focused program modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone.

Meanwhile, the Y programs continued to grow. In summer 2015, there were 225 Sulphur Springs youth in the Y summer camp program and in the first month of the 2015-16 school year, 300 of the 650 children attending Sulphur Springs Community School were participating in the Y's after-school program, Qadree said.

**Leaving a Legacy**

Though long-time resident Robinson has scaled back her involvement in the work of the coalition, she is quick to acknowledge the changes that have taken place – and they extend beyond the obvious lessons about healthy eating. Total health and well-being requires much more than just access to healthy food, she noted.

"Access to healthy food is good but if you don't know how to prepare food, or budget your money, you have to be educated," she said. "Granted, you want healthy food; but if you are not healthy in your mind about where you are, there's going to be a problem. We wanted to also teach community pride and ownership: 'What can I do to help my community?'"

And helping the community is a long-term process, she said.

"Just because you do something today, it doesn't show results tomorrow. A number of people got discouraged because things didn't happen right away.

A community garden takes work and commitment. You see grass grow all the time but fruits and vegetables are a whole different thing. People learned that things take time and things don't change all at once."

As the funding from the Florida Blue Foundation draws to a close, Qadree has an orderly transition planned for the CHSSK coalition: it will become the Health and Nutrition Work Group for the Neighborhood of Promise.

"Because our coalition had engaged our residents and the grantees, when it came time for Neighborhood of Promise to step in, we had provided an important part of the foundation they needed and our model of cooperation provided a good pool of partners," Qadree said.

Both Qadree and Robinson hope for a bright future for Sulphur Springs.

"We have a lot of amenities," Robinson said. "We want people to think of Sulphur Springs as a positive place to grow and put down roots."


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*Healthy living lessons are infused into all student activities at PCAT.*

# PCAT - Parents and Children Advance Together Literacy Ministries

Christine Worley offers a blunt and unvarnished assessment of the nutritional welfare of children in the Tampa neighborhood of Sulphur Springs:

“They eat a lot of fast food. The parents don’t oversee their diet. There is no set mealtime. The parents don’t cook, or they do very little cooking, and if they do cook, they fry. They buy all of their food at one time, rather than spacing out their shopping over the month, and then the kids just pick what they want to eat with no discipline.”

That assessment has led Worley to teach younger Sulphur Springs children about good nutrition and active living. With the support of the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids (CHSSK) coalition and the Florida Blue Foundation, she has incorporated a formal nutrition curriculum into her after-school reading program.

Worley could be called a “pioneer” of the modern-day Sulphur Springs.

Fifteen years ago, she was a marketing executive, busy businesswoman and an active volunteer at her church. When a group of children from Sulphur Springs participated in a church program, she was stunned by their lack of literacy skills. After months of consideration, “a lot of prayer,” and extensive consultation with leaders of Tampa’s nonprofit sector, Worley quit her job and opened PCAT.

Initially, PCAT operated as an after-school program inside the Sulphur Springs Elementary (now K-8) School, serving first- and second-grade students. The focus was helping children improve their reading skills.

For the first eight years, Worley said, PCAT was “the only agency operating in Sulphur Springs.”

Consequently, she saw the community in its most difficult time.

“I had second graders who were going home to watch their siblings, who were toddlers,” she said. “One evening, I was driving children home and a toddler in diapers just walked out into the street from between two parked cars. I almost hit him. Fortunately, the kids I was taking home knew who he was and where he belonged.”

In 2009, when the Tampa Metropolitan YMCA opened operations inside the elementary school, Worley was delighted. The Y launched its YMCA READS! program for first- through third-graders and Worley shifted PCAT’s focus to

kindergarten students to avoid duplication of services and increase impact. She also moved her operations out of the school house and into a small bungalow directly across the street from the school. The current space provides a home-like atmosphere, with separate rooms for the students' different activity centers.

As the CHSSK coalition began its work, Worley joined the effort, acutely aware of the nutritional needs of the children in the neighborhood, where poverty and the absence of full-service grocery stores make it difficult for families to access healthy foods.

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, Worley purchased a nutrition curriculum from education publishers McMillan/McGraw Hill and hired a teacher to teach it.

"I wanted to do that because I knew the children needed it," she said. "They weren't eating properly."

Today, nutrition and healthy living lessons are infused into all of the student activities at PCAT. As children learn words and develop their reading skills, they are learning about good foods and exercise and growing a healthy body.

Students are referred to PCAT by their kindergarten teachers, based on the results of their reading assessment at the start of the school year.

Worley picks up her students from their classrooms at the end of the school day, provides a healthy snack, and then moves the youngsters through a series of activities, with help from college students from nearby campuses. The kindergartners have one-on-one tutoring, computer classes, reading games, art and dance programs with a literacy focus and free reading time before their day ends at 6 p.m.

Since Worley has been working in the community so long, she has seen some of her early students grow up.

"I saw some who are now in junior high at a community event last Saturday," she said. "I saw a young man who said he has been accepted into USF [University of South Florida]. I came back and cried after that."

She knows the program helps her students: In the last several years, all of her kindergarten students have scored sufficiently to be promoted to first grade, even though some arrive at her doorstep not knowing their ABCs.

And she feels the community as a whole is improving.

"There is more health awareness now," she said. "They are understanding that vegetables are important—but that's just in the past few years. It's better than it was since everyone came together to do things.

"The parents are more appreciative of this program than they were. It took a long time for them to trust me. They tell me that so many folks had come in and promised them the moon only to be gone in a year or two. I told them I was here to stay. But it took a while for them to believe me. Now they call me 'the PCAT lady.'"

*Walking school buses introduced scores of parents and children to a healthier, safer way to get to school each morning and back home in the afternoon.*

# University of South Florida - Walking School Bus

On a Thursday morning in September, the streets around Sulphur Springs Community School are crowded with cars, school buses and lots of adults and children walking to school.

There are families walking, single adults walking with a single child, and then there are larger groups of children accompanied by one or two adults.

In Sulphur Springs, these are known as “walking school buses” – adult-chaperoned groups of children who are picked up at their homes and escorted safely to school each day, and back home.

The Walking School Bus program is entering its fifth year in Sulphur Springs, and, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, it has introduced scores of parents and children to a healthier, safer way to get to school each morning.

Sulphur Springs is a small community – 1 square-mile – that is almost exclusively residential and not bisected by any major thoroughfare. Sulphur Springs Community School – a K-8 public school – sits near the geographic center of the neighborhood.

The community’s demographics – low income, high transience and high crime – put its children at greater risk for childhood obesity. Low-income households have more difficulty accessing healthy foods, and unsafe neighborhoods make it more difficult for children to have the active lifestyle that promotes good health.

Sulphur Springs, for example, is not the safest place for children to walk. Sidewalks are intermittent. Vacant, overgrown lots can obscure sightlines at intersections. Crime is high and the neighborhood is reported to have a large number of registered sex offenders in residence. For elementary aged children, the route from home to school, though short, can be fraught with peril.

In 2010, Jason Jackman was a research associate at the Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida, located about three miles north of Sulphur Springs. Jackman was interested in pedestrian safety, liked the geographic cohesion of Sulphur Springs and approached the school about launching a Walking School Bus program.

Under the program, Jackman would recruit adults to be school bus “leaders,” conduct background checks and provide them with safety training and a bright safety vest, and the leaders would then walk a group of neighborhood children to school each morning. The parents of the children gave their permission for their children to participate in the Walking School Bus program.

Not only would children be safer, but they would get some exercise and enjoy some fellowship along the way.

The program got off to a slow start. Jackman is white. The majority of Sulphur Springs residents are not white. And after years of watching short-lived programs come and go, Sulphur Springs residents are notoriously skeptical of outsiders looking to "improve things" in their community.

"We had a few parents sign up, but … ." Jackman said.

When the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids coalition began working to combat childhood obesity in the community, Jackman connected with them.

"During one of the planning sessions, someone said something about the importance of quality over quantity," he said. "That made me think."

He began investing more time in the Sulphur Springs neighborhood, getting to know the parents and school personnel. "I did a lot of face time. I would go in the morning, trying to connect with a parent. I knew I needed to make more of a presence. [The key] was connecting with people who already were walking with their kids. It took about a year."

In 2012, the coalition, with support from the Florida Blue Foundation, helped Jackman deepen his relationships with the school, parents and children. It provided resources for the safety programs and underwrote stipends that could be awarded to Walking School Bus leaders.

School Bus leaders came in all ages, Jackman said.

Sammie Fudge was an 18-year-old resident of Sulphur Springs who was struggling to navigate a transition point in his life. He volunteered to be a Walking School Bus leader and his youthful energy and bright smile made him an instant success.

"He would play games with the children as they walked along and have them jumping and laughing. It was not just a walk to school, it was an experience," said Jackman.

Fudge not only attracted children to his school bus, he attracted other adults to the program. Adults such as Rodney Lucky – "Mr. Lucky"—a veteran, parent and, according Saima Qadree with CHSSK coalition and the YMCA, "a very formal, organized man."

Lucky managed a group of about 20 children walking a 45-minute route to connect with youngsters from the corners of the community. "He wore a whistle

and blew the whistle when he reached a student's home," Qadree said. "The kids loved it but the parents hated that whistle."

In 2013, tragedy drove home the importance of adult supervision and safety on the street. A Sulphur Springs student was struck by a vehicle and killed while trying to cross a busy, six-lane thoroughfare on the north boundary of the neighborhood.

"That was a big shock for the school as whole," Qadree said. "That was a big, big loss."

Jackman went to the school the day after the accident to talk with parents and reinforce his safety messages. "That was hard for me, but this is real," he said. "You have to be alert."

At its peak, the Walking School Bus program had 15 groups of children coming from all corners of the neighborhood to school each morning. But Sulphur Springs is a transient community and elementary schools, by definition, are transient places. Fudge moved into a job with the YMCA in Sulphur Springs and Lucky and his daughter moved out of the neighborhood.

The program continues, albeit on a slightly smaller scale. And the lessons of safety and walking to school have taken root, as evidenced by the large numbers of children and adults streaming in on foot to school in the morning.

"Our work with the Florida Blue Foundation really helped expand the program and get folks walking from all quadrants," Jackman said.

*Get Your Fit On improves the nutrition and activity levels of the neighborhood's elementary children.*

# St. Joseph's Children's Advocacy Center—Get Your Fit On

St. Joseph's Children's Advocacy Center, part of the BayCare Health System, has a long history of helping Tampa's children and their families be healthy, stay safe and access the information that they need to make wise decisions.

When an opportunity arose in 2012 to help reduce the risk of obesity among the children of Tampa's Sulphur Springs community, the Center's staff jumped at the chance. They quickly discovered the depth of the challenges confronting the historic, but impoverished, community. Using creativity and intentional outreach, the staff brought innovative programs to Sulphur Springs, and gave the children some experiences that they will remember for a lifetime.

The children of Sulphur Springs are at heightened risk for childhood obesity because of their environment and their demographics. The predominantly residential neighborhood has a high crime rate and its residents have very low incomes – a quarter of the households earn $10,000 or less annually. There are no full-service grocery stores in the neighborhood, meaning fresh food is not readily available. Children are less likely to get exercise and play outdoors when neighborhoods are not safe. And lower-income families typically rely on filling, calorie dense foods that are easy to find, rather than healthier choices that may be more difficult to obtain.

In 2012, the Children's Advocacy Center received support from the Florida Blue Foundation to work with the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for kids (CHSSK) coalition to improve the nutrition and activity levels of the neighborhood's elementary children.

Colette Boggs, Get Your Fit On coordinator and child advocate, and her colleagues at the Center created Get Your Fit On—a grade-appropriate, interactive nutritional education and physical fitness program, based at Sulphur Springs Elementary School, where the YMCA operates after-school and summer programs.

"That first summer, we had 83 kids," Boggs said, all first- and second-graders.

The children would spend the first 30 minutes of the 90-minute program learning about nutrition and healthy lifestyles. Then, after a 30-minute outdoor play period, they would spend the remaining time creating a healthy snack.

"They would make mini-pizzas on English muffins with cream cheese and toppings," Boggs said, "or parfaits with yogurt and fruit."

Staff quickly realized, however, that they needed to bridge the gap between the children's growing awareness of good nutrition and the lack of awareness in their homes.

"You can change the kid but if they are going home to the same thing … ." said Boggs.

Boggs decided to try to engage families in the program, creating Dinner & Dialogues. Center staff provided dinner for the families; after dinner, YMCA staff provided free child care while the parents enjoyed a program. For one session, the hospital's mobile care unit staff conducted BMI tests and discussed the importance of maintaining a healthy weight. In another session, a chef from Whole Foods Market gave a demonstration on healthy cooking.

By the end of the summer, Boggs was anticipating working with the students during the school year. At this time, the community had a successful chapter of Girls on the Run, a national program that helps girls develop self-esteem and confidence while training for distance running. In her early conversations with the children, Boggs learned that the boys at Sulphur Springs Elementary were envious of the Girls on the Run program.

Boggs decided to capitalize on that envy and, in November, launched an unofficial "Boys on the Run" program, working with 22 boys in grades 3-5. She taught nutrition and healthy lifestyles, and helped them train to compete in the annual Gasparilla 5K, part of Tampa's annual winter festival.

When race day dawned in February 2013, the boys donned superhero costumes and painted their faces and headed to the race course, where they planned to run the last two miles of the race.

"People were high-fiving them along the race course," Boggs said. "They cheered and encouraged them, and then the boys took off. Some took off like hares."

Others were slower, Boggs said.

"One child had asthma really bad. He had worked hard with us all winter and he walked the whole two miles – something he couldn't have done in the fall. Not only did his asthma and his fitness improve, but his self-esteem also improved. He was so proud."

Despite these successes, Boggs continued to wrestle with ways to engage parents and families and drive the nutrition and exercise lessons into the home.

"Teaching the kids nutrition is easy," she said. "It's simple lessons: more color on your plate is better. I explain about sugary drinks – it's like liquid candy. Then the penny drops. They get it."

By the second school year, Boggs met a group of older women in the neighborhood who were interested in teaching the next generation about cooking and nutrition. These were women who felt they had good skills in the kitchen and were concerned that "the younger generation" was not carrying on traditions of home-cooked meals and family time.

Once again, Boggs saw an opportunity.

"We assisted them in their mission," she said.

She created Chat & Chew—a six-week program where participants share a meal and learn about healthy eating, losing weight and keeping it off, physical activity and healthy living. The "teachers" were the older women.

Similarly, Boggs connected with Hip Hop Basketball, a local program that uses basketball to bring families together while teaching about business and financial management. Boggs convinced them to add health and nutrition components to their educational lineup.

"You can't just say the message one time," said Saima Qadree with the YMCA in Sulphur Springs.

"We basically enhanced what was there [in the community] by bringing in every possible resource," agreed Boggs.

At the end of the day, Boggs said, she measures her success by the lessons learned.

"I think I have accomplished my goal if they learn something – even if it is just one thing."

And the relationships that she built only made the experience better. "I loved it. You got to know people and they got to know you."

*Teamwork is included in the social and emotional learning provided by Frameworks to elementary and middle school children in Sulphur Springs.*

## Frameworks of Tampa Bay

You might expect this to happen:

A fifth-grade student comes to class, not tearful, but in obvious emotional distress. His teacher, busy with the tasks of the day, does not acknowledge the boy's condition. His classmates steer clear of interacting. As the day wears on, the boy withdraws, becomes inattentive and, when challenged by his teacher, lashes out.

At Sulphur Springs Community School, this is what really happened:

A fifth-grade student came to class, not tearful, but in obvious emotional distress. His teacher acknowledged his condition, and asked if the boy had anything he wished to share. The boy told his classmates that his dog had died the previous evening. The dog was 11. The boy was 11. They had grown up together. The teacher asked if any students wished to comment. One student put an arm around the boy's shoulders and said he was sorry. A second student related his experience with the death of a pet. A third student asked if there was anything he could do to help his classmate feel better.

These fifth-graders at Sulphur Springs Community School have benefitted from a program called "social and emotional learning." Delivered by Frameworks of Tampa Bay, Inc., the program helps young people learn to manage their emotions, develop healthy relationships and make good decisions for academic, career and personal success.

Across the elementary and middle grades, students in the Tampa neighborhood of Sulphur Springs have experienced social and emotional learning with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, as part of its Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative to reduce the risk of childhood obesity.

Sulphur Springs children have a heightened risk of childhood obesity because of neighborhood poverty: Household incomes in Sulphur Springs are almost half that of those in the City of Tampa and one out of four households earns less than $10,000 a year. Low-income households have more difficulty accessing fresh fruits and vegetables and are more likely to consume a filling, calorie-dense diet that is less healthy.

How, you might ask, does social and emotional learning reduce the risk of childhood obesity? Frameworks' Chief Education Officer Kim Williams explains:

"A lot of research shows that for children in poverty and those living under economic stress, their brain is always in 'fight or flight' mode. They can't make good decisions. They are going to struggle with handling their emotions."

And young people who can't manage their emotions will often cope with their stress through unhealthy eating.

"It's tough not to eat when you are stressed," Williams said. "It's hard to feel good about yourself and take care of yourself when you are upset."

In 2013, when Frameworks began working in Sulphur Springs with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the staff encountered many children in 'fight or flight' mode, Williams said.

"For the students at Sulphur Springs, that is what we have seen," she said. "They are very quick to react.

"It's really about helping to mediate those [poverty] factors. For families in Sulphur Springs, there are competing priorities."

Frameworks trains teachers and school administrators, giving them the tools to help their students begin to understand their emotions, name them and manage them appropriately.

The teachers use posters that depict various emotions—sad faces, angry faces, lonely faces, shy faces, happy faces. Other posters show students how to respond to their rising anger with the "turtle" response: slow down, hug yourself tight, take a deep breath and then state the problem. In each class, one child is randomly selected each day to be the "child of the day;" classmates are expected to find ways to compliment the child of the day.

Calvinisha, age 13, at Sligh Middle School, talked about how the program had affected her:

"Before I came here, I didn't really know how to deal with my anger… but after I started here it actually helped me learn how to calm down and take the next step and be the bigger person."

In addition to in-classroom training sessions at Sulphur Springs Community School, Frameworks provides a staff person who provides intensive, small-group support for children who are identified as high-need by their teachers.

"The teachers are looking for ways to support the students," Williams said. The positive experiences of Frameworks "helps teachers see that if they give the kids a chance, they can be different. It really is about changing the culture. Teachers know the kids need this."

Saima Qadree, who has worked with YMCA programs at the school since 2009, sees the impact the program has had. “Coming from 2009 to where we are today,” she said, “and the level of behavior change—it’s night and day.”

And the children?

“They get it,” Williams said. “They like and understand it. As kids start to learn these techniques, they take them home to their parents. One mother told me she watched her son one night and asked him what he was doing; he said, ‘I’m doing turtle. I learned it at school. So I won’t get angry.’”

*Community representatives provide lessons on health, safety and nutrition to Sulphur Springs elementary students.*

## More Health

For years, representatives of Tampa-based More Health, Inc., have been standing in front of classrooms in Sulphur Springs' neighborhood schools, delivering lessons on health, safety and nutrition.

"We've been in that community forever teaching our lessons in the schools," said Karen Pesce Buckenheimer, More Health's executive director.

Despite having a strong curriculum and highly trained, well-coached teachers, More Health leaders knew their efforts were only going so far.

"The challenge," Buckenheimer said, "comes when you are teaching the children and they go home and say, 'Mom, you're not supposed to fry that chicken,' but Mama's going to fry that chicken anyway."

With the support of the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids (CHSSK) coalition and the Florida Blue Foundation, More Health found a way to extend its reach in the Sulphur Springs community, and have a potentially greater impact on children and their families.

Children in Sulphur Springs are at high risk for childhood obesity: the CHSSK coalition's research found that 11 percent of children in Sulphur Springs' county of Hillsborough were obese.

Sulphur Springs is a low-income community, where one out of four households earns $10,000 or less a year. There are no full-service grocery stores or pharmacies in the community, meaning families have a more difficult time accessing fresh fruits and vegetables. Moreover, families on limited incomes tend to favor calorie-dense foods that are filling but often have lower nutritional value.

More Health has worked with Hillsborough County public schools for 27 years, Buckenheimer said. Started as a project of the Junior League of Tampa, More Health was adopted after three years by Tampa General Hospital, which remains its sustaining supporter. The nonprofit has a formal set of health, nutrition and safety programs that are grade-level specific. Schools request the programs and More Health provides trained teachers to deliver the curriculum, without any charge to the school district.

Though More Health had worked in Sulphur Springs schools for years, staff was not fully aware of the depth of challenges in the community until it began working with the CHSSK coalition.

"We gained a lot of partners and we learned a lot more about Sulphur Springs," said Carlene Lemaster, More Health's operations manager. "We didn't know the scope of the challenges. We have been able to give more."

With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, More Health developed Healthy & Fit, an after-school/evening program for parents, caregivers and children. The five-week program was offered for both middle and elementary schools serving Sulphur Springs.

"We had everyone from four-year-olds to seniors," Lemaster said. "We brought in a fitness expert, taught Zumba and Caribbean dancing. We had dads, too. We had as many dads as moms."

Class session would include an educational lecture, followed by exercise and then a healthy snack—maybe granola or "apple pie s'mores" made with graham crackers, cream cheese and apple slices.

"When you teach parents and children, when they hear a unified message, they are all going in the same direction, heading for the same goal," said Buckenheimer.

More Health also conducted a special session of Healthy & Fit for the teachers at Sulphur Springs Elementary (now K-8) School. They taught a first aid class for grandparents at the Community Resource Center. And they taught health and safety classes to new mothers through Layla's House, a center for young parents in the neighborhood.

Their community engagement went beyond the basics of nutrition. When they realized how many children did not have toothbrushes, they taught a dental health course and gave away toothbrushes. They taught firearm safety, partnering with representatives of the Hillsborough Sheriff's Department. They added financial literacy to one of the health and safety courses, partnering with banking representatives to explain how to open a checking account, how to avoid predatory lenders, and the difference between needs and wants. "It was 30 minutes past time to go home and they were still there asking questions," Lemaster said.

Lemaster echoed the observations of others who have worked in Sulphur Springs: it takes time to establish relationships. "It took time to gain the trust of the community and get them to where they wanted to work with you," she said. "They call me 'Little Mama' now, so I think I'm in."

Their efforts have earned rewards, both for More Health and for the community. The organization has received funding from The Community Foundation of

Tampa Bay to enhance and expand Sulphur Springs' fledgling community garden.

"The relationships have continued, the partnerships have continued and it has brought new funding into the community," Buckenheimer said.

But some of the best rewards came from families.

"It was good to really bring in the parents," Lemaster said. "After the lesson on reading nutrition labels, one parent told me, 'OMG, it took us an hour in the cereal aisle!'

"Giving the same message to the entire family is so rewarding."

*Layla's House is working to ensure that Sulphur Springs' youngest residents benefit from healthy eating and an active lifestyle.*

## Layla's House

In the heart of Sulphur Springs sits a tidy, new house, set back from the street and shaded by large trees. In front of the house is a carefully fenced playground with bright, colorful equipment.

This is Layla's House—a resource center for expectant and new parents and their children, ages birth to five.

The goal of the staff at Layla's House is to promote healthy, happy families. In a community such as Sulphur Springs, one of Tampa's poorest, that is no small challenge.

"Poverty is the overlaying challenge," said Liz Kennedy, one of the founders and the first director of Layla's House. "Our mothers are trapped in poverty and when you are trapped you make crummy decisions."

By helping parents make better decisions about child health and development, the staff at Layla's House is furthering the aims of the Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids (CHSSK) coalition, which was established in 2010 to reduce the risk of childhood obesity in Sulphur Springs. With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, CHSSK and Layla's House are working to ensure that Sulphur Springs' youngest residents benefit from healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

"Sulphur Springs is the poorest neighborhood in the City of Tampa," Kennedy said. "The residents live from day to day. There is a lot of transience because they are not in a financial position to maintain a healthy household. We are talking about multiple issues."

These challenges increase the risk of childhood obesity. Poor families generally have less access to fresh, healthy food (in fact, there are no full-service grocery stores in Sulphur Springs). They tend to eat affordable, calorie-dense foods that are generally less healthy.

At Layla's House, expectant mothers learn about the nutritional demands of pregnancy and how to maintain a healthy weight and get exercise throughout pregnancy.

With support of the Florida Blue Foundation, Layla's House staff encourages new mothers to breast-feed their children. Studies show that breast milk may promote healthier weight in babies because it contains an ideal mix of sugars, carbohydrates, amino acids and important bacteria. It also is suggested that breast-feeding allows babies to control their own portions.

Layla's House also offers an array of programs that cover all aspects of early child health, from safe child care to nutrition to car seats.

"We do a great job with building attachment between mother and child," Kennedy said. "We are focused on healthy child development and we do all of the screenings and refer those who need to be referred. It's all about safety, attachment and good health."

Layla's House is modeled after Baby Bungalow, a similar resource center about 10 miles away in southwest Tampa. It is a partnership between the Tampa Metropolitan YMCA and Champions for Children, a child-abuse prevention and family education organization in Tampa. (Layla's House is named after a 16-year-old girl who died of leukemia. Her family and friends wanted to memorialize her and recognize her love of children and passion for helping others.)

Layla's House was started just before the CHSSK coalition was formed, and the timing and close relationship with the YMCA proved beneficial, Kennedy said.

"We were brand new—we had just opened," she said, "and I had a woman working for me who was interested in breast-feeding outreach. We had breast pumps available and were promoting breast-feeding."

But beyond the obvious benefits to the community, Kennedy said, affiliation with the coalition benefitted Layla's House as an organization.

"CHSSK was a great community initiative," she said. "It enabled us to meet other agencies in the community and really begin to galvanize the community."

Today, in addition to offering a wealth of programs, Layla's House serves as an anchor of sorts for Sulphur Springs. Its meeting rooms are used for a wide variety of community convenings. The community garden is located directly across the street. And, in many ways, it is a crossroads where young families can meet and learn to support one another in those challenging first years.

And that, according to Kennedy, is just what Layla's House was intended to do. "Our focus is on strengthening families," she said, "and keeping infants safe and healthy."


FREE B


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*Tallahassee COPE Coalition Leadership Team – Marchelle Dunston, Felicia Green, Sokoya Finch, Cynthia Harris, Penny Ralston, Miaisha Mitchell.*

# Tallahassee

## *Creating a Community-wide Movement Around Health*

Tallahassee, Florida, is a mid-sized southern city with a wealth of amenities—the state capitol, three major colleges, extensive urban parks and a landscape of rolling hills that is unique in Florida.

Yet Tallahassee shares a challenge with a host of other American cities: too many of its young people are overweight or obese.

In Leon County (Tallahassee is the only incorporated municipality in Leon County), 30.4 percent of adults are overweight and 14.7 percent of Leon County high school students have a body mass index (BMI) above the 95th percentile.

Research shows that blacks and African-Americans are particularly at risk for obesity—a key consideration for Tallahassee, where the population is 35 percent black or African-American. In Leon County, 59 percent of African-Americans are overweight or obese.

“We recognized there was a problem,” said Dr. Cynthia Harris, director and professor of the Institute for Public Health at Florida A&M University. “People told us stories about obesity. We knew we needed more family and community engagement. We identified that Tallahassee, indeed, had food deserts.”

When the Florida Blue Foundation approached Harris in 2010 about developing a community coalition to reduce the risk of childhood obesity, Harris knew it was an idea whose time had come. And she thought Tallahassee had the potential to create a community-wide movement.

With 280,000 residents, Tallahassee is, in many ways, a small town. “Everyone here knows everyone,” said the young clerk, a recent college graduate, at the local nursery. “I’m from Tampa. It’s so spread out—no one knows anyone. I like it much better in Tallahassee.”

He is not alone. Across the city, one meets young people who came to attend college and stayed.

Three universities—Florida State University, Florida A&M University and Tallahassee Community College—bring a combined 54,000 undergraduate students to the community. Add the presence of state government and the annual influx of the 160-member Florida Legislature and Tallahassee has a market that would be the envy of many communities. There is a robust food scene, with creative local restaurants, farmers markets and farm-to-table enterprises. There also is a robust sports and outdoors scene, with amateur leagues and clubs across the city.

## Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE)

1) Engage local public and private sector stakeholders in the identification of best practices and development and implementation of existing and new policies to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in Tallahassee

2) Engage local community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and business and work-site communities in the design, implementation, evaluation and support of local health and wellness programs to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in Tallahassee

3) Engage, develop and support school-based health and wellness programs and youth leadership initiatives that inform and promote the reduction and prevention of childhood obesity in Tallahassee

4) Engage and support early childhood development and education programs and family and parental involvement in childhood and youth programs to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in Tallahassee

5) Engage and support best practices for increased access to local healthy foods to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in Tallahassee

6) Engage and support increased physical activity and access to visual and cultural performing arts for local youth in the reduction and prevention of childhood obesity in Tallahassee

Still, some neighborhoods are not part of the mainstream. And that was the challenge facing Harris and her colleagues: engaging young people and families from all parts of Tallahassee—particularly those that were underserved—in efforts to improve health and wellness.

To build the community coalition, Harris drew on the expertise of three long-time colleagues: Sokoya Finch, director of Florida Family Network, public health professional and community volunteer; Miaisha Mitchell with the Greater Frenchtown Revitalization Council; and Dr. Penny Ralston, professor, Dean Emeritus and director of the Center on Better Health and Life for Underserved Populations at Florida State University. The four women had worked together on community initiatives through the years and "there was a lot of trust there," said Ralston.

"There was a good balance between the academicians and community activists, and all were really committed to community outreach and contributing to research, education and training," said Finch.

"While each of us knew our special areas," Mitchell said, "we could fill in for one another."

With support from the Florida Blue Foundation, they launched an intentional effort to understand the childhood obesity challenges facing the community, bring stakeholders together and identify a broad and diverse strategy to address those challenges.

"We saw this opportunity as a vehicle to bring our partners and resources together to work a seamless plan across the city and county," said Finch.

The Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) Coalition focused its attention on childhood obesity, but, Finch said, they knew that the problem was larger. "We were focusing on the children but what was missing were the adults," she said.

They realized they could reach adults through the children. "They [adults] thought this was a nice thing for children without realizing that they were absorbing the messages too," Mitchell said. "It was like gardening – they thought they were gardening but they also were getting physical activity and eating better fresh foods."

To build the coalition, the women first reached out to their networks, which were extensive through years of community work. Then those individuals brought in their networks. Ultimately, COPE had almost 100 participating organizations.

"We did a survey to identify our good points and bad points," Finch said. The group then formed teams to address four priority areas:

- Public health / prevention
- Community planning
- Education / communication
- Policy

Each team assessed resources and activities, identified gaps and made specific recommendations for action. The recommendations then were coordinated and combined to create the community Call to Action.

"We had a structure that was really tight and it worked really well because we had authentic engagement from those at the table," said Finch.

"It was stakeholder driven, for sure," said Mitchell. "That approach really resonated with folks."

Beyond the Call to Action, the process resulted in new relationships among community players.

"We had organizations working together that had never worked together before," said Ralston. "The community is different today because of this."

With the Call to Action in hand, the coalition awarded a series of mini-grants, funded by the Florida Blue Foundation, to community organizations to implement the suggested changes. Even the grant making process was a team effort, the women said.

"I'm the flowery one who wants to give everyone a chance," Mitchell said. Finch was the disciplinarian who made sure proposals were done properly.

When the proposals were submitted, "we put them out on the table and put them in clusters and began to see alignments," Finch said.

"The clustering was really important to helping people come together," Mitchell said.

They also struck a balance in the types of groups they supported: "Not only did we want to help those organizations that were already working in this area go further, but we also wanted to help new groups that had an idea—to help them try it," Finch said.

Not surprisingly, some groups have succeeded, and others have not. But in travels across the community, individuals talk about the sweep of change that has occurred in Tallahassee in the past four years: greater awareness of health needs and the risks of childhood obesity, greater awareness of the unique needs of certain communities and more recognition from public and private sectors that promoting good health concerns is an important community value.

“I don’t think any of the four of us could have imagined what has happened,” said Harris. “It is a movement.”

Beyond the Florida Blue Foundation funding, COPE has recently received $500,000 from the City of Tallahassee to support a farmers market in Frenchtown and another in South City—both are underserved communities and food deserts. And COPE continues to bring people and organizations together.

“We don’t want people to go back into their original silos,” said Harris. “Today, there’s a lot of hope.”

*Titus Champions is a natural component of a community-wide strategy to reduce the risk of childhood obesity in Tallahassee.*

# Titus & Champions

On a muggy November afternoon, two dozen 6th, 7th and 8th grade students are running relay sprints around a big square in the gymnasium at Augusta Raa Middle School in Tallahassee.

The idea is to take the corners tight and run hard on the straight-away. But styles vary.

One student who is well over 6' tall and pushing 200 pounds is fast, with a big loping stride. Another, a short wiry kid who has not yet seen 100 pounds, is whip-quick. And then there is one, a little chunky around the middle, whose dogged determination makes up for a lack of athleticism.

All three are on the Left team and on this day, they beat out the Right team by a millisecond. Fists pump. There are a few jumps for joy. In the far corner, the losers laugh and vow revenge.

Sweating and panting, these boys and girls are having fun. They also are getting a big dose of exercise and a different kind of physical education: they are learning to be "champions." With the help of the Florida Blue Foundation, all elementary and middle school students in Leon County Public Schools will have the chance to be champions.

Like their peers in many communities, young people in Tallahassee face an increased risk of childhood obesity and its associated health problems. But in Tallahassee—a mid-sized city (fewer than 200,000 population)—the community has pooled resources and efforts to lower the risk and get its children to adopt good nutrition and an active lifestyle.

The Champions program is part of that effort.

It was created by Titus Human Performance Solutions, a Tallahassee-based company that specializes in human athletic development. Titus coaches and staff have trained Olympic athletes, military special operations soldiers, Heisman trophy winners, X Games World Champions and scores of other professionals.

"We developed expertise in training and then we pushed our skills and methodologies into population health," said Titus CEO Adam Faurot.

Titus launched Champions for students in Leon County in 2005. Today, more than 25,000 students—kindergarten to 8th grade—from seven west Florida school districts participate in Champions either as part of their in-school physical

education program or in an after-school program. In Leon County, Champions is in every public elementary and middle school.

“We are exceeding or meeting national and state standards for physical education,” Faurot said. “We are able to build an ideal program.”

At Augusta Raa Middle School, the Champions program is part of the PE class every Tuesday and Thursday. (Champions also is offered in the after-school program.) The training focuses not on the skills needed to participate in a particular sport or athletic event, but on five fundamental physical qualities—mobility/flexibility, speed, strength, agility and endurance—and four tactics: moving with control, moving to open spaces, being unpredictable and supporting teammates.

It’s an approach that works well with school students, who as a group are very diverse in their stages of growth and physical development, as well as their interests, said Jen Ace, a Champions team coordinator. “Not all kids like to play basketball, or are good at basketball,” she said. “If we just teach sports, some kids get left out. But by teaching fundamentals, they all gain skills that they can use in whatever they want to do.”

But Champions is about more than just athletic ability. Champions strives to make students aware of what they are doing in games and how they make choices related to the game. They want students to reflect on those choices and develop a better understanding of game play. Through this approach, Ace said, Champions hopes to enhance students’ life skills and self-regulatory behaviors.

Through it all, the kids get a LOT of exercise.

Before the sprints around the square, the students at Augusta Raa had started the session with warm-ups. Then there were a series of relays that mixed sprints with sit-ups. Then there was a medicine ball toss. And, as in all Champions sessions, there was a time for reflection.

“Yes, we are a fitness program,” Ace said, “but we are really about building leaders.”

That leadership training includes teaching students to support—and ultimately lead—one another to be successful. Champion coaches serve as role models for the students, demonstrating leadership while simultaneously learning about leadership.

The coaches, for the most part, are young adults from the community. For many, this is their first job out of college. They go through a rigorous training program with Titus to prepare to be a coach and the program is highly structured and scripted, so quality and fidelity remain high.

Members of the Tallahassee Coalition for Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) saw Champions as a natural component of a community-wide strategy to reduce the risk of childhood obesity. With support of the Florida Blue Foundation, COPE not only supported the Champions program, itself, but also supported Champions' research into the benefits of exercise and well-timed nutrition.

Champion's staff established a study group of 29 students, ages 7-18. Thirteen students were in a control group that received no extra snacks during the day. The remaining 16 students received small (150-250-calorie) snacks at critical points in the day to maintain their "energy balance." When one maintains energy balance, the body does not "hoard" calories and store them as fat to protect from hunger.

At the end of four months, the students receiving timely snacks recorded a greater increase in skeletal and muscle mass than did those in the control group. "Greater acquisition of skeletal muscle ... is a strong predictor of lower obesity risk, as there is more tissue present that requires and uses energy," Champions reported. Meanwhile, students who did not receive timely snacks, and who experience energy balance deficits, had higher body fat percentages and body-mass-indices.

Armed with this research, Champions is now beginning conversations about refining the quality and timing of food that students receive throughout the day.

Ace sees Champions' work as part of a groundswell of interest across Tallahassee in improving the health of young people. That includes the work of COPE and the programs supported by the Florida Blue Foundation.

"This is a very walkable city with lots of parks and gardens," she said. "The community has done a great job. And it hasn't done just one thing."


*Children help launch the 95210 campaign to improve healthy lifestyles for Leon County schoolchildren and their families.*

# The Foundation for Leon County Schools

When Sheila Costigan was a Tallahassee public school teacher, she saw first-hand the impact of poor diets and insufficient exercise.

“I was watching my students grow – literally,” she said.

Today, as executive director of The Foundation for Leon County Schools, Costigan is an active member of the community coalition fighting to improve child health and reduce the risk of childhood obesity. With the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, the Leon County Schools foundation has been a leader in the 95210 campaign to improve healthy lifestyles for Leon County schoolchildren and their families.

Leon County Public School system serves roughly 34,000 students at 52 school sites. According to Costigan, one out of three of those students is at risk for childhood diabetes.

In spring 2010, the Foundation held its first Stomping Out Type II Diabetes event—a family centered morning of education and fun focused on good health. It was the beginning of an intentional focus on health and wellness for the Foundation, which provides supplemental funding to Leon County Public Schools.

“We have multiple focus areas—we do a lot of enrichment work, we work to prevent teen pregnancy, we do many things,” said Costigan. “But we wanted health and wellness to be a central part of our work.”

Costigan and her colleagues identified two strategies to accomplish that goal: working on school district policies and building awareness of healthy living among public school students.

On the policy side, Costigan said the Foundation has tackled both formal policies and what she calls “soft” policies, and she ticks off the accomplishments:

The district no longer considers physical education to be expendable—that is, students no longer are pulled from PE for punishment or for tutoring or coaching.

The district has increased its support of school health fairs and has funded the position of Wellness Champion in each school. And the district has encouraged development of school gardens. “All but two of our 24 elementary schools now have a garden,” Costigan said.

The district has added nutrition labels to food served in school cafeterias. It has discouraged the use of sweets (cupcakes and candy bars) for school fundraisers or parties. And, in one of its most significant moves, it has approved the use of school-garden-grown foods in the offerings in the cafeteria.

To build awareness among students, the Foundation introduced the 95210 campaign, beginning with 3rd and 4th grade students.

The 95210 campaign reminds students and families that young people need:

9 hours of sleep each night

5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day

2 hours maximum of screen time daily

1 hour of exercise daily

and 0 sugary drinks or tobacco products, ever.

The campaign was developed in collaboration with the Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) Coalition, Whole Child Leon and Tallahassee Memorial Health Care.

Rather than develop an entire curriculum to teach children, the Foundation opted for an awareness campaign.

“Teachers have so many demands on them already,” Costigan said. “We didn’t want to add to that. We didn’t do a curriculum. This is not required—it is an awareness campaign.”

In many ways, she said, that makes it easier for educators to incorporate 95210 into the learning agenda. And in many schools, the adults have had as much fun with it as the students.

“We’ve been to assemblies where the adults were dressed up like a bunch of grapes. They can make it fun.”

The Foundation provides posters, postcards and other collateral materials and encourages in-school activities to get the message out.

Meanwhile, Whole Child Leon provided similar materials to pediatricians, encouraging them to incorporate the 95210 campaign into their well-child examinations. And Working Well, a Tallahassee-based nonprofit that helps organizations design and deliver worksite wellness programs, began using

the 95210 campaign in its activities and distributing refrigerator magnets and other reminders.

Pre- and post- campaign surveys began to show an increase in student awareness and shifts in student preferences, Costigan said.

Using these multiple "megaphones" is important, Costigan said, to really drive family change over time.

"The message will get down in the family, just like the campaigns about drugs and cigarettes and seat belts," she said, "but it will take time."

One of her biggest surprises has been the need to share this message with families who are well-educated and financially well-off. "I have smart parents say to me, 'my child won't eat the fruit; he always chooses the junk food.' I asked them, 'Do your children do the grocery shopping? If you don't want them to eat junk food, don't buy it.' They never thought of that! They need to hear these messages, too."

To further drive change into the schools, the Foundation this year offered $40,000 in mini-grants to 23 Leon County schools to support activities that encourage good student health. The funds come from the Stomping Out Type II Diabetes event, which has raised more than $100,000 during its six-year run. The grants support activities such as: pre- and post-cardio endurance tests, nutrition surveys, presidential physical fitness challenges, recipe centers, cooking classes, garden clubs, walking clubs and field days.

"We are replicating what the Florida Blue Foundation taught us about mini-grants—using small dollars to make good things happen," Costigan said.

*Tallahassee Youth Health Leaders are ambassadors for healthy eating and active living.*

# Youth for Change & Youth Health Leadership

When community leaders in Tallahassee gathered to create a coalition to reduce the risk of childhood obesity, they realized that some of the most effective agents for change would be young people.

The community Call to Action, developed by the Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) Coalition, reflects that. Embedded in the document are specific goals such as "Engage, develop, and support local and civic youth health leadership initiatives and teams," and "Design, implement and evaluate health and wellness education programs that target existing community-based youth groups."

In the three years since that Call to Action was created, the COPE vision has been realized. Through multiple organizations, programs and initiatives, young people across Tallahassee have been engaged in the community's efforts to reduce childhood obesity and improve community health.

"What we have seen is these young people stepping out and impacting the community beyond just their families," said Dr. Penny Ralston, professor, Dean Emeritus and director of the Center on Better Health and Life for Underserved Populations at Florida State University.

Through multiple partnerships, COPE has connected with groups such as the Tallahassee 4H, Distinguished Young Gentlemen of America, and Dare to Dream Young Girls Network, among others. Indeed, from program to program, young people in Tallahassee are ambassadors for healthy eating and active living—and in becoming ambassadors, they are discovering and acquiring new skills, such as public speaking, presentation and advocacy, as well as learning how civil society works.

Tonetta Scott, a public health professional, is among those who created youth-focused opportunities.

A native of South Carolina, Scott came to Tallahassee to attend college and chose to stay. One of her graduate school colleagues, Qasimah Boston, shared her interest in working with young people. Boston's focus was food insecurity and Scott's was leadership development. They combined their interests and the result was Tallahassee Youth for Change, which used visual art to analyze the city's food environment and stimulate change.

"We wanted to get the kids involved instead of just sitting there being lectured to," Scott said.

Youth for Change used the Photovoice model, which employs digital storytelling to help empower individuals and create change. Youth for Change provided youth, ages 8-18, with digital cameras and asked them to take photos of the food they saw in their daily life.

“One girl took a photo of a box of brownie mix,” Scott said. “Just the box of brownie mix. Her story was that she wanted the brownies. She liked the brownies. But she knew that the brownies were not the healthiest choice for her. And she needed to think about making better food choices for herself and her family.”

The photos were mounted and displayed in a youth symposium, and the young people were asked to share their stories with the attendees. The photos also were displayed before the Tallahassee City Council and before the COPE leadership team meeting.

In addition to sharing the images and stories, the young people were challenged to think about ways they could change the image, or the setting, to create a healthier environment.

“If you have a visual, you are more likely to make a change,” Scott said.

Of course, many of the lessons learned by these young people were unrelated to food: they learned public speaking and storytelling skills as well as how to advocate for their position.

And, according to Scott, the experience was rewarding for the young people. “It is good to see the kids so excited about it,” she said.

“Excited” is the perfect description for Kaleigh Wingate, Kami Yancy and Zenani Johnson, three young women who participated in the Youth Health Leadership program. The simplest question elicits a stream of enthusiastic conversation about the program, the way it has impacted their lives, the way it has impacted their families and new opportunities it has opened for them.

The Youth Health Leadership program recruits young people ages 12-18 from 17 existing youth organizations in the Tallahassee community. These young people—to date, three cohorts totaling 31 youth—participate in six-week education programs that focus on “behavior change related to diet, physical activity and recreational technology use.” Two months later, the youth are re-checked to assess the degree to which behavior changes are lasting.

Compared to a control group, the YHL cohorts show more consumption of fruits; less consumption of fatty, sweet and salty foods; fewer fast food restaurant visits; and increases in physical activity.

While these results are good, the youths' narratives are more revealing.

"I learned you can start looking at nutritional labels and understand what you are eating," said Wingate, age 17. "We did journals and shared with each other. I would walk at the park or run. I got more into working out and eating right and watching what you're eating and taking care of myself. I was able to teach my friend at school not to eat out as much."

Yancy, 18, was in student government in her high school and, through that experience, learned about YHL.

"I just want to say what a great impact YHL is having on my life and everyone around me," she said. "It was an overall eye opener for me. People know what they should eat but it's easy to get away from that. Even my dad—he walks every day now. He's lost a lot of weight. YHL not only affected me, it affected all of the people around me.'"

Johnson, who is 18, agreed.

"We learned about healthier alternatives to snacks," she said. "I joined my school's cheer team and ran track."

For Johnson, the YHL experience motivated her to make other changes. At her high school, she started a new initiative called Teens and the Law. "It's an interactive program," she said. "Law enforcement offices from NOBLE [National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives] come to the school and do seminars with the students and give us tips on safety and good health." To launch the program, Johnson wrote and received a $1,000 grant from the local Awesome Foundation.

"These young people have learned so much," said Ralston, "and they help to bring about change not only in themselves and their families but also in the community."

*Gardening teaches young people about nutrition, farming, food sourcing, marketing, and the importance of working across the divides of race, income and geography.*

# iGrow Community Garden

In Tallahassee, community gardening has gone from a nice-to-have neighborhood activity to a robust, entrepreneurial enterprise.

Since 2012, with the support of the Florida Blue Foundation, staff and volunteers at iGrow Community Garden have farmed row crops and raised beds to produce an array of vegetables and herbs that are distributed through restaurants, farmers markets, online markets and neighborhood giveaways. In the process, they have taught scores of young people about nutrition, farming, food sourcing and marketing and the importance of working across the divides of race, income and geography.

“iGrow is an urban agricultural youth development program,” said Sundiata Ameh-El, who currently is in charge at iGrow.

Thanks to his leadership and that of his predecessor, Nathan Ballantine, iGrow has been so successful the City of Tallahassee helped underwrite the cost of expanding the program to a second site.

iGrow’s original site is located in Frenchtown, a residential neighborhood on the northern boundary of the campus of Florida State University. Once a thriving African-American community (and home to musician Ray Charles), Frenchtown today is a mix of run-down and fixed-up bungalows. While Frenchtown shows evidence of revitalization, the transformation is far from complete.

Frenchtown is a food desert—there is no full-service grocery in the neighborhood. For a population with lower-than-average incomes, accessing healthy, fresh nutritious food is a challenge.

Ballantine had worked with Miaisha Mitchell of the Greater Frenchtown Revitalization Council to create a youth leadership development program. In the course of helping the youth to develop ideas for community projects, Ballantine, Mitchell and the young people took a walking tour of Frenchtown. They noticed that some residents had backyard gardens and the youth suggested that they create a community garden.

In October 2012, iGrow was launched with a grant from the Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) Coalition, underwritten by the Florida Blue Foundation.

Located on a little more than an acre of land between two residential streets in Frenchtown, iGrow operates year-round.

On an unseasonably warm Friday afternoon in November, 15-20 students are volunteering in the garden. Florida State University will play the top-ranked football team in the nation the next day, but these students are busy assembling a cold frame, watering and transplanting bok choy.

One young woman, a hospitality major at FSU, says she was introduced to iGrow through a college course and fell in love with gardening – an unlikely passion, she notes, given that her family "eats only two vegetables – green beans and Caesar salad. But here I have been introduced to Swiss chard and greens and all kinds of things. I love it. I just love being outdoors."

At this time of year, the garden beds are thick with leafy greens and cabbages. Green and red pepper plants are large and bushy. The tender bok choy and varieties of herbs are maturing nicely.

The produce, once harvested, is distributed through a number of channels, Sundiata says. The Frenchtown Farmers Market and the Red Hills Online Market (www.rhomarket.com) both carry iGrow produce. There are several Tallahassee restaurants that use iGrow produce. And produce is shared with the residents of Frenchtown.

"People can walk up and ask for whatever they want," Sundiata said.

To encourage residents to access food from the garden, the volunteers aggressively gave food away.

"We harvested 150 pounds of sweet potatoes," Sundiata said, "and we went out and walked the neighborhood and offered the potatoes to anyone who wanted them. The next time, we put the word out that we were again giving away food but they had to come to the tree [in the center of the garden] to get it. We wanted to bring them in, build a connection. Then the next time we asked them to stay for a brief community workshop thinking about things they could do to help their community."

It's a subtle way of community organizing using food as the attraction, he said.

It also is a way to introduce people to new foods.

"When we began the garden, we took a survey of residents and asked them what vegetables they liked," Sundiata said. "People said greens, collards, mustard greens and the usual carrots, peppers, potatoes."

"Today, if someone wants collards, I'll give them collards, but throw in a bunch of kale and tell them to try it. They'll ask me how to cook it. I'll say 'just cook it

like you cook your greens.' And they will come back and say 'that kale, that was good stuff!'"

Sundiata and his volunteers get a lot of questions from neighborhood gardeners asking advice on how to make their home gardens more prolific. He shares ideas freely and he shares his space freely—the garden is open and unfenced, accessible to all.

"The garden is part of the neighborhood," he said. "We don't want it fenced off. When we took this land, it was open and this was a cut-through for folks walking through the neighborhood. We didn't want to disrupt their patterns, so, you see those beds over there planted on the diagonal? They are there to kind of guide people through the property – to let them know it's ok to walk through here."

Similarly, he shares his expertise and life experiences with the volunteers. Sundiata's background is in childhood development; he is a teacher who tired of the classroom. The garden now is his classroom, and, each day, he calls a "circling time," where volunteers introduce themselves and share thoughts.

"One day, I asked them, 'What would you like to change about yourself or your community or the world?' Boy, that really brought out the emotion – one talked about the sister who did drugs and another about how he wanted to be more motivated. It was something."

iGrow has intentional connections with both FSU and Florida A&M University, through specific professors and, in particular, the FSU Center for Leadership and Social Change. These connections provide a pipeline of volunteers, but also build the reputation of the garden.

When iGrow expressed interest in expanding to South City, another low-income neighborhood about three miles south of Frenchtown, the City of Tallahassee agreed to underwrite some of the infrastructure costs. Today, the second iGrow site is up and running with a volunteer cadre of its own.

For Sundiata, it has been lessons learned in process.

"I didn't have any particular background in agriculture," he said. "I worked with Nathan [Ballantine] and learned everything I could. I just learned everything I could."


I'm
the
Mickey
Jordan


17

# Lessons Learned from the Funder to other Funders:

*A New Way of Investing in Communities*

***For eight years, the Florida Blue Foundation worked in six diverse Florida communities supporting work to reduce the risk of childhood obesity.***

***The Foundation's strategy involved building coalitions of community organizations and stakeholders who could address the unique and particular needs of each community in a manner most appropriate for that community.***

***For communities and grant makers interested in undertaking similar work, the Foundation offers these lessons learned.***

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**BEFORE YOU BEGIN:**

## Be Intentional. This Is Hard Work.

A commitment to deep community investment is not something that should be taken lightly. The work is hard and time-consuming and requires great adaptability by the funder.

In its early years, the Florida Blue Foundation had been a traditional grant maker, focusing much of its efforts on supporting organizations that increased access to health care for Florida's uninsured residents. Through that work, the Foundation learned a great deal about health disparities. The Foundation also learned that its work, while impactful and worthwhile, was not reaching as deeply into communities as might be possible.

In 2007, the Foundation staff and board chose to shift from "reactive" grant making to "proactive" grant making—identifying an issue of concern, taking a strategic approach and working more deeply in a select group of communities across the state. They identified childhood obesity as the issue of concern, and the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative was born.

In the years that followed, the intended five-year initiative became an eight-year initiative; the intended investment of $3 million became over $15 million. The work was slower and more expensive than anticipated. And it was harder. Pathways were not always clear. Networks and coalitions were sometimes challenging to build and maintain. Program staff had to employ new skills.

"It costs a lot to do community coalition building and do it right," said Susan Towler, vice president of the Foundation. "It is about more than money. It takes time and energy from everyone involved."

Miaisha Mitchell, who helped lead the Foundation's work in Tallahassee, agreed.

"It's not about the money, I can tell you that," she said. "You can't pay for the work we have done. You have to be in this for the long haul. It takes real commitment. You have to be patient, and then you have to be *really* patient."

## Lesson #1—First, Learn

Remember the maxim: Do your homework. Having a thorough understanding of the issue of concern will enable a more strategic and effective response. It also will enhance the quality of community conversations, helping to dispel myths and build actions based on data and evidence.

At the outset, the Florida Blue Foundation staff went to school on childhood obesity, learning its causes, why it had mushroomed into a public health concern so quickly, what the ramifications were and what interventions were most effective.

Some of what they learned defied the conventional wisdom of the day. "It wasn't about uncaring mothers," said Towler. "It often was about the built environment. It was about unsafe neighborhoods and sidewalks so overgrown that the tree would hit you in the head if you walked by, and food deserts, and playgrounds that were chained and locked on the weekends."

They studied the work of other funders, in particular, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and learned from their experiences.

Armed with good knowledge, they were better equipped for the next step on their journey.

## Lesson #2—Listen. Really Listen.

Though the Foundation had developed significant knowledge on strategies to reduce the risk of childhood obesity, staff knew they could not impose those strategies on communities.

"We knew we needed to develop sincere, authentic community coalitions—composed of people and organizations that came from the community," Towler said. "If things were going to change, we had to help communities overcome the barriers to healthy living. But we knew that they had to tell us what the barriers were."

And that meant listening.

The Foundation developed an intentional process for listening, and launched a "listening tour" in the five major markets in the state: Jacksonville (where the Foundation is based), Tallahassee, Orlando, Tampa/St. Petersburg and Miami.

In each community, they hosted three listening sessions:

Session #1 would include all of the community's private funders. The Foundation asked three questions: Who in the community is working on childhood obesity and what are they doing? Who is doing the best work? Who are you funding?

Session #2 would include what the Foundation loosely called "the government types." This included the Department of Health, the Health Planning Council, the local public school district and similar agencies. Again, the Foundation asked three questions: Who in the community is working on childhood obesity and what are they doing? Who is doing the best work? What, if anything, are you doing?

Session #3 included all of the organizations and individuals who had been mentioned in Sessions #1 and #2—as well as any community stakeholders who volunteered to participate. The Foundation asked this group a series of questions: What are you doing around childhood obesity prevention? How is it going? What are your successes? What are you doing well? What are your challenges? What obstacles do you encounter? How could we be of help?

Through these listening sessions, Foundation staff developed a picture of the community landscape, which helped them identify opportunities, community assets and—importantly—potential community leaders.

"You have to listen—really listen—to the community, and not just check the box," Towler said.

## Lesson #3—Build from Strength

When a funder looks to work in a community, it must ask itself, "Who will I fund?" In the best situations, there is some community asset—an organization or program or entity—that is aligned with the funder's ambitions and can benefit from the funder's support. This asset then can become the vehicle for change in the community.

In Jacksonville, for instance, the Duval County Health Department already had in place a childhood obesity prevention coalition. The coalition did not have adequate funding, Towler said, but it had people at the table and that was an asset that could be built upon.

In Orlando, the regional health planning council had been working with another private funder, Winter Park Health Foundation, on childhood obesity prevention, drawing on the expertise of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

In Tallahassee, there were two major universities that had academicians working on nutrition and health issues, as well as some nascent community activities.

Miami, by contrast, presented great challenges. “Everyone told us to look at Liberty City and Overtown because those communities have such great needs,” Towler said. “We did, but there was nothing there we could build on; no one was working on childhood obesity prevention there at that time.”

But in Hialeah they found a city government with a strong parks system with extensive programming, strong relationships with community organizations and a high interest in health. And in neighboring Opa-locka, a state-wide nonprofit had been working to build family assets and was willing to add a focus on nutrition and health to its agenda.

When the landscape was not conducive, the Foundation did not force the issue. In Tampa and St. Petersburg—two adjacent communities that often compete for the spotlight—the listening session hit a snag. Stakeholders were wary of sharing information with colleagues in the neighboring community and the conversation lacked the candor and richness experienced in other communities. The Foundation almost walked away before a local private funder helped them navigate the political waters and find a suitable neighborhood and suitable partners with whom to work.

Ultimately, the Foundation identified six communities—Jacksonville, Parramore (Orlando), Hialeah and Opa-locka (Miami-Dade County), Sulphur Springs (Tampa) and Tallahassee—that had assets on which it could build.

## Lesson #4—Leadership Must Be Local

Having a vehicle for change is one thing. Having drivers for that vehicle is another.

“Leadership is the big lesson,” said Towler. “When it comes to making real change in the community, it’s the people—individual leadership—that matters.

In each community, the Foundation identified a “lead organization” that took responsibility for organizing the work and being the fiscal agent. There was no cookie-cutter approach to identifying these entities; each community’s solution was unique. In Jacksonville, the lead organization was the Health Department; in Orlando, the Health Council of East Central Florida; in Sulphur Springs, the

YMCA; in Hialeah, the city parks department; in Opa-locka, a state-wide nonprofit; in Tallahassee, a university.

“Early on, we thought that we would find one type of lead organization and replicate it in each location – like the county health department or the local YMCA,” said Towler. “But we quickly realized we had to work with the leaders and groups that had authentic trust and respect within the community – not just the name recognition.”

Once the lead organization for each community had been identified, the task was to build a coalition of stakeholders willing and interested in working on the issue.

“What we tried to do was find the organizations that had the community networks, that knew who was really doing things, not just saying they were working on it,” Towler said.

In each community, the lead organization engaged in a listening process very much like the one used by the Foundation. They invited individuals and groups to the table and asked about the challenges facing the community with respect to nutrition, activity and healthy living.

They sought out those with deep roots in the community, who had the credibility to bring others to the table—people like Elaine Cauthen of the Health Council staff who worked on the Parramore coalition. “I could get people to do things because they trusted me,” said Cauthen. “I don’t live in Parramore but I work in Parramore and I sometimes worship in Parramore. I can go in any church in this community and I know people and they know me. It wouldn’t have worked otherwise.”

In Tallahassee, the coalition was led by four women who, together, had worked on a host of community issues for years. “There was a lot of trust there,” said one, Dr. Penny Ralston, professor, Dean Emeritus and director of the Center on Better Health and Life for Underserved Populations at Florida State University.

Similarly, Jeff Lagomacini was critical to the initiative’s success in Hialeah. A native of Hialeah, he knew the community. A key employee with the City of Hialeah, he knew the lead organization. And wherever he goes in Hialeah, he is embraced. “These are my people,” he said.

## Lesson #5—Provide Resources

Leaders and lead organizations need resources to do their jobs well. The Foundation provided an array of resources to the six communities.

"We didn't just give the agencies money—but money helps, because they don't have to worry about whether they can afford to do this work," Towler said. "But we also gave a lot of technical assistance in coalition building—teaching them the same listening strategies and skills that we had used."

From the onset, the Foundation provided an independent evaluator to monitor the community work. The Foundation led monthly conference calls among the community leaders to encourage them to share experiences and ideas and learn from one another. The Foundation also provided funding to the lead organizations to help underwrite their costs and enable them to access specific resources.

Many of the costs were related to personnel. The work is very time consuming. Community relationships are not built on the fly—they require leaders' patience and their presence. A lead organization may need to dedicate a part of an employee's job duties to development and management of the community coalition.

"It takes a lot for a lead organization to do this work," Cauthen of Parramore said. "It's important to have a good understanding of what is required of the lead organization. You need to recognize the time required for conference calls, conferences and so forth and budget for time as much as for money."

Lagomacini, from Hialeah, found that most of his working day was consumed with the work of the coalition and the structure of his job had to change to accommodate that.

Coalitions also were tasked to learn—just as the Foundation had learned—about the specifics of childhood obesity in their community. That generated some research needs—perhaps a community survey, or more academic research.

Some communities sought special expertise.

"It was new to all of us," said Marla Alpizar, who led the City of Hialeah's initiative. "This was our first project where we built a community coalition. We didn't know how to do that. We wanted subject matter experts to lead our work groups and so we hired the University of Miami to serve as facilitators and evaluators for us. They stayed with us throughout the process and that was a smart move. Their expertise helped us and their presence gave us instant exposure and credibility."

Each community was tasked with developing a written "Call to Action" that documented community needs with respect to childhood obesity and recommended action. There were resource needs associated with producing and publishing these reports.

In addition to community-specific resources, the Foundation provided training to all lead organizations to ensure they had the tools and skills to meet expectations. That included training in logic modeling and development of action plans, as well as coaching in the reporting methods that would be required for the evaluation process used by the Foundation.

## Lesson #6—Require a Plan, and Make Sure it is *Their* Plan

With any significant community investment, a funder wants some assurance that there will be action as well as learning. To move the coalitions in this direction, the Foundation required each community to produce a Call to Action—a professionally published document that made the case for why change was needed and outlined the specific activities that the coalition had decided would reduce the risk of childhood obesity in that community.

The Call to Action accomplished several objectives:

- It provided a framework that required each community to make a case, articulate goals and strategies.
- Its production required teamwork and collaboration among the stakeholders.
- Once published, it provided each community with a professional document that could be used to build community awareness and understanding.

While the objectives were the same across communities, the plans varied widely.

Each community took its own unique approach to research, analysis and strategy. The use of a logic model forced communities to organize their strategy, but it did not dictate their strategy.

"The ownership of everything was with the coalition," said Sokoya Finch, one of the leaders of the Tallahassee coalition. "The structure was important and it provides a good template for other communities—being inclusive and inviting, letting the coalition stakeholders guide the direction of the work."

Allowing each community its freedom was an important factor, Towler said.

"You have to be OK that they are going to do it their way," she said. "They might have 12 action steps or they might have 55. You can set a high bar but you can't dictate what their plan is going to look like."

## Lesson #7—Be Prepared to Facilitate Action

To be effective, the Call to Action must lead to action. And it likely will fall to the funder to facilitate at least some of that action.

The Florida Blue Foundation chose to underwrite mini-grants that would be awarded by the coalitions to community-based organizations that could help achieve the objectives in the Calls to Action.

This approach provided resources to get community work off the ground quickly. It also served to enhance the credibility of the lead organizations within the community: "Having dollars helps to get people to the table," said Cauthen.

But it created a new set of challenges for the Foundation: it had to build the skills of the coalitions in the area of grant making. That proved to be a steep climb for both the coalitions and the Foundation.

The lead organizations had to make decisions on grantees, which meant they had to learn how to evaluate the strength of a proposal and the capacity of an organization. They had to learn how to maintain a professional and objective approach in the face of expectations from those who thought they deserved special treatment.

"Having the Foundation involved provides you cover for some grant decisions that may not be popular," Cauthen said. "We were able to say, 'Well, they didn't think so, and so … .' Because we have to live here and continue to work with these people."

The Foundation, meanwhile, was learning its own lessons about how to manage this type of grant making. "It changes the role of the program officer from one who critiques a proposal to one who is a teacher, an advisor and partner," said Towler. "In the end, it helped us to learn and develop our ability to do mini-grants."

The Foundation board approved the dollar amount of the mini-grants but not who ultimately received the grants.

Initially, all the proposals and funds were channeled through the Foundation. But after year one, the Foundation engaged The Miami Foundation, a community foundation based in South Florida, to serve as fiduciary for the mini-grant program. That gave the lead organizations the experience of working with a different funder.

"By the third year, the lead organizations were on it!" said Velma Monteiro-Tribble, the Florida Blue Foundation's director of grants and programs. "It was a great lesson learned by them—growing their skills in that arena and growing their impact in their own community."

## Lesson #8—Build Networks

Complex issues require the attention of multiple actors intervening at multiple points over time. Networks are essential.

The Foundation established a pattern of network building from the outset, convening groups for listening sessions, and then reinforcing the importance of networks through the development of community coalitions.

Through subgroups and workgroups, each community coalition developed its own new networks.

"We started with our circles, and brought them in," said Dr. Cynthia Harris, one of the leaders of the Tallahassee coalition, "and then each of those people brought their circles in and it just grew."

The Foundation, however, added another layer of networks—building a network of the six communities and encouraging them to share with and learn from one another.

The lead organization representatives met regularly via conference calls and sometimes in person. They learned from one another and from one another's experiences. Years after the initiative began, people in Tallahassee are familiar with the work in Opa-locka, and people in Hialeah know people in Parramore.

"They weren't competing with one another," Towler said. "That made it easier for them to build a network."

## Lesson #9—Adjust and Adapt

This work, like virtually all philanthropic endeavors, is a work in process. It requires continuous attention – patience, flexibility and adjustments.

In 2011, Monteiro-Tribble joined the Florida Blue Foundation team and her philanthropic expertise gave fresh eyes to the program. While she was impressed with what she saw, the initiative was a bit daunting.

“What was unique was the idea of starting with, ‘let’s gather information,’ and then letting the communities figure out their solutions,” she said. “This is a scary model because you are taking a big risk that things won’t work out.”

Monteiro-Tribble exerted what Towler calls “artful guidance,” and helped both the communities and the Foundation stay on track.

For example, the Foundation had put in an evaluation process at the outset (begin with the end in mind). As time passed, they modified that evaluation so that it would capture qualitative as well as quantitative measures and collateral impacts, Monteiro-Tribble said.

And by 2012, there were changes within each of the communities that required attention. Key people moved to other jobs, for example. Rather than fret over that change, the Foundation saw it as an opportunity to check in, ask about progress and success and see the work through new eyes.

## Lesson #10—Look for Legacy

From the outset, Towler said, the Foundation understood that success meant having a lasting impact on these six communities.

“We knew from the beginning that success was not giving Johnny an apple and telling him to walk around the block,” said Towler. “To create lasting change, we had to get to the causes—the barriers to health—that allowed childhood obesity to flourish. Much of it focused on the built environment, neighborhood safety, the lack of playgrounds or playgrounds that were locked.”

The coalitions worked with school systems to unlock school athletic fields on the weekends. They worked with cities to trim back trees and overgrown shrubbery so sidewalks were clear to travel and were not scary places.

“The work is very authentic, sincere and honest and not bringing your own agenda,” Towler said.

As the initiative wound to a close, the Foundation asked each community to identify a legacy project that would leave a lasting resource for the community. For some, it is a food hub or entrepreneurial marketplace; for others, it is technology resources that enable people to access information better.

In each case, having the coalition in place is a critical component to community success.

“Community coalition building is a must for work like this,” Towler said.

Having the communities create coalitions, do their own fact-finding, and identify their own leadership who could help move action—all of that gets you deeper into communities. Towler said. “It allows you to still be effective years down the road—because you have built community capacity.”

Do we have any regrets? No. Would we do this again? Yes, because we see the value, the “buy-in” and long lasting results when the community owned the process and the outcomes/impacts. This process changed lives and the Foundation learned so much in the process.

# Special Acknowledgements

*“The Believers”*

## Special Acknowledgments—*The Believers*

Florida Blue Foundation Board of Directors – These stories from the six communities would not have happened without the funding, support and commitment from this group. So, a very special "thank you" goes out to all of the board members from 2007 to the present.

Susan Towler, vice president, Florida Blue Foundation, and executive director, Corporate Social Responsibility – Her engaging and inclusive management style and commitment to understanding how communities work were a major plus from the beginning for this initiative. She actively participated in all of the community onsite visits, town hall meetings and stakeholder interviews. Susan understands and is committed to "real" grassroots community engagement where they, the community, are actively involved in defining their needs and solutions, and the funder works as a partner in the process. Thank you, Susan.

Christine Robinson and Dr. Michael Hutton, consultants—The Foundation and the community are grateful and indebted to the two of you for your "on the ground" hard work listening and honoring the communities as you helped to form what the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative would look like. Your insights and expertise into the use of "evidence-based" framework/modeling for tracking the successes and impacts of this initiative set the stage for the work to be accomplished. Christine and Michael also identified and implemented the technical assistance, capacity building and skills development training that were needed to get the communities and lead organizations ready to take on their roles and responsibilities.

Velma Monteiro-Tribble, director, Foundation Grants and Programs – Through the new perspective you brought to the initiative when you joined the Foundation in 2011, and your guidance, philanthropic expertise, and leadership, you helped the communities and the Foundation stay on track. Because of you, we know and are able to report on the successes, outcomes and impacts of the initiative. We can share the stories from the communities that are included in this publication. We know that the children and families in the six communities are healthier. Thank you, Velma.

Susan F. Wildes, senior program manager, Florida Blue Foundation—Susan, a special thank you for your work with this initiative. You provided excellent oversight, program/fiscal management and technical assistance to the lead organizations. Your nurturing and collaborative leadership style, in part, enhanced the success and growth of the lead organizations and mini-grantees in the six communities under this initiative. Again, thank you, Susan.

Lead Organizations – "A job well done" goes out to all six of the lead

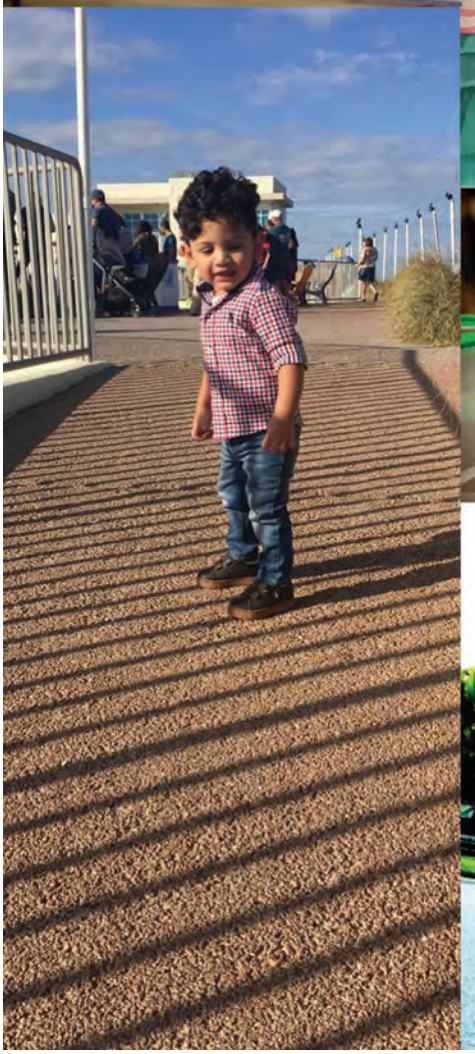
organizations for their leadership, community engagement, coalition building, managing mini-grantees and willingness to learn new skills. Without your hard work and tenacity, the success of the initiative would not have been possible. The Florida Blue Foundation applauds all of you for working in partnership with your communities, and with each other, to combat obesity in children, families and communities. Without you, the stories written in this publication would not have been possible.

Many others contributed greatly to this initiative: 1) MGT of America, the evaluation team under the direction of Dr. Fred Seamon and Hope Smith, who worked hard to evaluate the quantitative and qualitative outcomes and impacts under this initiative; 2) The many community partners and mini-grantees for their "grassroots" work and tireless involvement in making a difference in each of the six communities to combat childhood obesity and to eliminate "food deserts"; and 3) All of the Florida Blue Foundation leadership and staff that played a support role to this initiative, to get the grant out, pay the bills and assist with different analysis and reports.

A special applaud goes out to Mary Kress Littlepage, a researcher and writer with KBT & Associates. Without her work, these stories would not have been possible. Mary reviewed every file in the Foundation on each of the six communities and then conducted interviewers in each of the communities with the lead organizations and the individuals in the community who shared their stories and pictures. Mary recorded their stories as they told them to her, and, now, we can share them with all of the readers. Mary worked diligently to make sure the recorded and written stories were authentically owned by those who told their stories. Again, a special thank you to Mary Kress Littlepage.

Lastly, the Florida Blue Foundation is proud of the positive results from the Embrace a Healthy Florida Initiative. We hope you find something in the stories that warms your heart and inspires you to get involved in community work to better the health and well-being of all people and communities in Florida.

Should you want more detailed information about the Embrace a Healthy Florida initiative, please contact us at floridabluefoundation@floridablue.com.



# The Six Communities

**Hialeah**
City of Hialeah Education & Community Services
*Hialeah Healthy Families/Familias Saludables*
305-818-9143
www.hialeahfl.gov
emiro@hialeahfl.gov

**Jacksonville**
Florida Department of Health in Duval County
*Healthy Jacksonville Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition*
904-253-1172
www.hjcopc.org
HealthyJax@flhealth.gov

**Opa-locka**
War on Poverty – Florida
*Building a Healthy Community Opa-locka Childhood Obesity Prevention Project*
904-766-7275
www.waronpoverty.org
klandry@waronpoverty.org

**Parramore**
Health Council of East Central Florida
*Building a Healthy Parramore and Reduce Obesity in Central Florida Kids (ROCK)*
866-991-3652
www.hcecf.org; www.rockfl.org
info@rockfl.org

**Sulphur Springs**
Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA
*Creating a Healthier Sulphur Springs for Kids*
813-224-9622
www.tampaymca.org
saima.qadree@tampaymca.org

**Tallahassee**
Florida A&M University Institute of Public Health, Florida Family Network, Greater Frenchtown Revitalization Council, and Florida State University Center on Better Health and Life for Underserved Populations
*Tallahassee Childhood Obesity Prevention Education (COPE) Coalition*
850-599-8655
www.tallycope.org
cynthia.harris2@famu.edu

The following served as members of the lead organizations and planning teams, some from the very beginning. The list is not meant to be inclusive of all who provided leadership and support throughout the life of the initiative.

**Hialeah**
Marla Alpizar
Jeffrey Lagomacini
Elizabeth Miro
Maria Toca
Lia Garcia

**Jacksonville**
Laureen Husband
Monique Ellis
Kelli T. Wells
Kathleen Stansell
Gloria McNair
Karen Tozzi
Kristina Wilson
ReShawndia Mitchell
Dana Fields-Johnson

**Opa-locka**
Karen Landry
Stephanie Sainvil
'Bola Olayinka
Leslie Osborne

**Parramore**
Ken Peach
Elaine Cauthen
Audrey Alexander
Shawna Kelsch
Melodie Griffin

**Sulphur Springs**
Saima Qadree
Mike Brown
Tom Looby
Urtorio Brown
Maureen Chiodini
Sharon McArthur
Mike McCollum
Cheryl Pollock

**Tallahassee**
Cynthia Harris
Sokoya Finch
Penny Ralston
Miaisha Mitchell
Marchelle Dunston
Felicia Green






# Promising Practices and Applied Research Grantees

The following organizations received Promising Practices or Applied Research grants:

ANNIKA Foundation

Cornerstone Family Ministries

Florida 180° Initiative

Florida Atlantic University, Lynn College of Nursing

Florida Child Health and Healthcare Quality Chartbook: Focus on Childhood Obesity

Florida Department of Health in Duval County

Florida Keys Area Health Education Center

Get Active Orlando

Health Planning Council of Northeast Florida

Hebni Nutrition Consultants

Hebni Nutrition Consultants – KYDS Take Charge! (Keeping Your Diet Straight)

Jewish Community Center Association – SPARK

Leon County Health Department

MicheLee Puppets: EXTREME Health Challenge

Nemours Child Care Obesity Prevention: Healthy Habits for Life

North Brevard Medical Support

Prime Time Palm Beach County: Project GROW (Guided Reflections on Wellness)

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

St. Joseph's Children's Advocacy Center – Kidz Bite Back

The Education Fund: Plant a Thousand Gardens – Collaborative Nutrition Initiative

United Way of the Big Bend

University of Florida—The Health-Smart Church Program to Promote Health and Modify and Prevent Obesity Among African-American Women and their Families

University of Florida Foundation, Psychology Department

University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension: Food of the Month Club – The OrganWise Guys Comprehensive School Program

War on Poverty-Florida: Building a Healthy Community – Childhood Obesity Prevention Project

Wolfson Children's Hospital – Kidz Bite Back

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