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Get A Move On
By Siona LaFrance
Health and fitness writer

A rollicking Ray Charles number set the mood and instructor Tayé Brown led the way for a dozen women on the floor of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in Central City.

It was a fitness class that at times seemed more like a '60s dance party, complete with retro moves such as the pony, the monkey and the jerk. At one point, when one of the women in the class gave up on a trickier step and just did her own thing, she got nothing but encouragement.

"I don't care if you just hop, as long as you're moving," Brown said.

Getting people moving -- whether it's dancing to music on the radio, taking the stairs more often or walking a few extra blocks each day -- is one of the goals of Step Together New Orleans, a public health initiative with a sweeping and ambitious agenda: to help people here live longer and healthier lives by reducing the burden of asthma, diabetes and obesity.

Financed primarily by a five-year, \$13 million grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and announced in 2003, the program is a collective effort involving public and private organizations, community groups and individuals.

"Truly, so many people have come together for a common cause here," said Carolyn Fernandez, program director for Step Together New Orleans. "We have so many health disparities in this city, and we fall at just about the bottom of the scale for everything."

Steps, as the program is called, organizes people into teams, called workgroups, that address such issues as asthma and diabetes care, community-based health, school health and making neighborhoods more conducive to play, walking and biking. For example, the program announced a plan to install 288 bike racks by early 2006 in a 36-block area that includes downtown and the Warehouse District.

Much of Step Together New Orleans involves behind-the-scenes initiatives, such as the asthma workgroup's efforts to reduce the number of visits that children are making to local emergency rooms for asthma-related problems. Such visits, Fernandez points out, often are a sign of other problems.

"It could be that they're not receiving the kind of preventative care they should be up to that point," she said. "What we're doing with that piece is looking at information from the emergency rooms and faxing a form to the patient's primary care physician that says your patient was seen in the emergency room, and trying to get an outpatient appointment for that patient.

"We also have clinical faculty from Tulane and LSU conducting workshops with pediatric primary care physicians to make sure they are up-to-date on National

Institutes of Health standards and guidelines for treating asthmatic children," Fernandez said.

"If the physician is informed and the patient gets to the doctor's office, then we have the battle almost won."

Other Steps initiatives involve collaborations, such as teaming with local churches and community groups to offer free and inexpensive fitness and health classes. The two-hour session held Mondays at Ashé is an example.

The center on Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard calls it "Sisters Making a Change Inner City Wellness Program," and the class includes toning, stretching and a range of dance styles as well as information about nutrition and wellness. Ashé also sponsors a two-hour class on Thursday evenings at the nearby St. John the Baptist Catholic Church.

"We're using this opportunity to focus on a necessary challenge, to increase the amount of physical activity in people's lives and improve diets," said Carol Bebelle, the director of Ashé. "At the same time, it has to do with spirituality and our sense of loving ourselves."

The Steps program also collaborated with the Crescent City Farmers Market and others to make it possible for people on the food stamp program to use their Louisiana Purchase cards to make purchases.

Jan. 19 was the kickoff date for the new wireless technology at the farmers market.

"Now individuals can swipe that card like a credit card and get tokens that they can take to individual vendors and make allowable purchases such as produce," Fernandez said.

One of the program's most visible efforts so far is a campaign, financed by the Entergy Charitable Trust, called "Treat You Right." It launched Feb. 9 with two television spots, radio ads and signs on the sides of city buses and streetcars. The signs feature slogans such as "Eat Green" and "Walk More," and one with a photograph of sliced oranges is labeled "Fast Food."

In one of the television spots, a man sits at his kitchen table with a take-out container of greasy food and grumbles about how hard it is to eat healthfully. Wordlessly, his wife opens the fridge, grabs a bag of pre-washed salad greens and a bottle of light dressing, puts the salad in a bowl and places it in front of him.

Another shows two women on an escalator. As they complain about having little time to exercise, another woman dashes by on the adjacent stairs. The first two women are next seen taking a walk together.

"The message is the small changes that can change everything," Fernandez said. "Sometimes I think it's a matter of opening our eyes and seeing where the opportunities are."

Eat better and exercise more. It's a simple message, but one that Dr. Tom Farley, a member of the task force that applied for the CDC grant that finances the Steps program, hopes will take hold in a community that has its share of ills.

"New Orleans is a wonderful town and people love to relax and enjoy themselves," Farley said. "But one of the problems we have here, and in this country as a whole, is that we don't think about the long-term consequences. In our modern environment, there are some bad health consequences of not thinking through everyday life behaviors.

"Obesity is the most obvious one right now," said Farley, a professor and chairman of community health sciences at the Tulane University School of Tropical Medicine. "Individuals are bombarded with messages to eat junk food, to relax on the sofa and watch the football game on television.

"We've got to counterbalance that message, to constantly remind people of the simple things that they can do to be healthy."

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