

Benefits Pulse

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Wellness champions take charge of their health

By Dave Schafer

Sometimes, it happens in a doctor's sterile office, with words of warning. Or early in the morning one day, out of the blue, you realize that you're not as happy with yourself as you would like to be.

Or, it happens when a stranger says something unflattering, innocent words that cut you. Or a family member dies in poor health, and you think, "That could be me."

If you're fortunate, that's when it happens. If you're not so fortunate, it happens in an emergency room, with pain and needle pricks.

It's the epiphany that you need to live healthier and treat your body with respect.

For three city employees, that epiphany drove them to lose weight, gain energy and vibrancy and live a healthier life. Those women are "Wellness Champions."

A dress that falls off

Valerie Jackson didn't believe her doctor or the scale she was standing on. "That's not right," she told the doctor.

So, they tried a different scale. And it did give a different reading: one pound less.

"Which number do you want to go with?" her doctor asked. It didn't matter. Both showed a number that was much too high.

Although significantly overweight, Jackson had escaped taking maintenance drugs. But now her doctor was threatening to prescribe blood-pressure pills, diabetic pills, "this and that," she said.

She had a month to lower the number on that scale, her doctor told her. Jackson went home and hung up her khaki skirt and pink-and-khaki blouse. That would be the last time she would wear them.

A couple of days later, on Oct. 1, Jackson walked out her door to take the first steps to losing weight and getting healthier. She was going for a brisk, 15-minute walk.



Griselda Garza has lost 43 pounds and improved her metabolic numbers by exercising and eating right. Now, Garza is helping other employees lose weight and feel better with her Get Fit class. Photo by Dave Schafer.

Discover what's inside

It's a good day to diet
Healthy habits can start at any age
pg. 6

Thunderin' thyroid!
The little gland causes big problems
pg. 8

Questions and Answers
Page 4

Retiree Readings
Pages 6-7

Just so You Know
Page 10

Three trees later, she was out of breath. "It was like I ran a mile," she said.

The next day, she walked a little farther. Then the day after that, and the day after that, increasing her stamina a little each day. She started walking during her breaks at work, including her lunch hour. She started walking around Hermann Park Golf Course carrying canned goods as imitation weights.

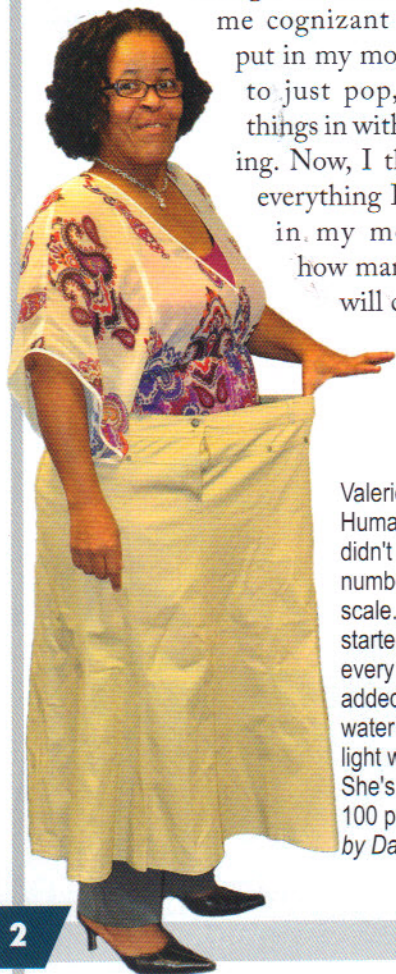
She couldn't get back to visit her doctor for two months. When she did, she'd lost about 25 pounds. By Jan. 1, she'd lost 37 pounds.

She added Zumba and water aerobics, then weights and the elliptical machine. She added ankle and wrist weights to those Hermann Park walks. The canned goods went to a homeless guy.

"You have to incorporate movement," she said. "Movement is what will actually get the weight off you."

And then, she started Weight Watchers, counting points for everything she ate.

"Weight Watchers is a lifestyle change," she said. "It makes me cognizant of what I put in my mouth. I used to just pop, pop, pop things in without thinking. Now, I think about everything I'm putting in my mouth, and how many points it will cost me."



Valerie Jackson, Human Resources, didn't like the number on her scale. So she started walking every day, then added Zumba, water aerobics and light weight lifting. She's lost nearly 100 pounds. Photo by Dave Schafer.

As of Nov. 15 – a little more than 13 months after she started exercising – she'd lost 93 pounds. She wants to lose about 80 more.

It hasn't always been easy, she said. She's had to reconfigure how she eats. But she's had a lot of support from family and friends, and from a higher power. When she eats, she says a little prayer, "Please lord, whatever hits my lips, don't let it hit my hips."

And when the times are tough, she can still look at that dress to steel her resolve.

"It falls off of me now," she said. "I will not go back to that weight. I refuse to go back to that."

half marathons and a 30K marathon before injuring her knee.

She switched to a diabetic's diet, cutting out sugar and cutting down on carbohydrates. She started reading labels to closely monitor exactly what she was eating.

According to the onsite Cigna biometrics screenings in June, her diabetes has reversed as her A1C test was four, down from 11.5. Her glucose dropped from a high of 298 to between 70 and 80.

She's also lost 43 pounds.

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You really have to have discipline, will power and really want to make it happen for you to be able to make a change in your lifestyle

- Griselda Garza

Deleting diabetes

Twenty-nine months ago, Griselda Garza's doctor wanted to prescribe insulin to treat the type 2 diabetes she'd been diagnosed with in 2005.

"You're crazy. No. I'm not doing that," she told him. "I refuse to stick myself."

She knew there were other options, but she also knew that she would have to be proactive in taking them.

She joined a running group and started working out every day at Fitness Connection, running on the treadmill, lifting light weights and taking a cardio class.

She soon realized that she had a passion for working out in the gym.

"I really, really liked that," said Garza, an administrative assistant in Human Resources. "Exercising and talking to people. It's a good feeling, and I leave feeling refreshed."

Three months later, she ran her first half marathon, 13.1 miles in 1 hour, 58 minutes. She has since run four more

change in your lifestyle," she said.

Garza earned her group-exercise certification through the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America, and now she teaches Get Fit and kickboxing classes at Fitness Connection on Tuesdays and is a substitute teacher for the Saturday step class.

She's bringing her hour-long Get Fit class, which focuses on cardio and toning the arms, legs and abs, to city employees. On Tuesdays and Thursdays starting Jan. 17, she'll be leading a class in the basement of 611 Walker.

The class doesn't use weights; it just requires participants, up to 25 per class, to bring workout clothes, a towel, a mat and water.

But even if people can't make it to her Get Fit class, they need to do something, she said. Too often, people let excuses prevent them from taking care of themselves. They're too busy. They don't have the energy. They have chores to do. They have to cook dinner.

"You will never do it if you think like that," she said. "Just throw your stuff in the car and go to the gym. You'll feel better when you're done. Then, go home and deal with your stuff."

One year, 130 pounds

Kimberly Bowie woke up one morning at 364 pounds. She was afraid of hitting 400.



Kimberly Bowie, Planning and Development, used Quick Weight Loss to lose more than 130 pounds in a year. Photo courtesy Bowie.

Bowie, a planner in Planning and Development's development-services section, had recently lost two aunts and two uncles who were in their late 70s and early 80s, so the specter of death loomed before her. She was 36, but she didn't need health problems to impede her quality of life or shorten it.

She didn't have any chronic health problems yet, but she knew they would come.

She couldn't control getting cancer or another sneaky disease. But she was determined to control what she could.

She was going to change her life and her lifestyle.

She went to Quick Weight Loss and told them she wanted to lose 180 pounds. It would take a year to lose that, they said.

A year? That long? *That's a long time not to eat fried chicken, not to eat pasta, not to drink (alcohol),* she thought.

Then, she rethought. One year in 36 to that point, hopefully 36 more to come. One year out of 75 or 80, and a better quality of life from it.

One year didn't seem like so much, then.

So, she started the program that limits the amount of food she eats and cuts out

sugar, sodium, fat and processed foods. She started eating more fish, chicken, fruits and vegetables.

"Most of the problem is mental," she said. "So you have to adjust the way you think about it."

"Food is not your friend," she told herself. Or, "It really doesn't taste that good."

She also had to challenge her preconceived notions about food, like the one that said paying \$5 for a salad at a fast-food restaurant was ridiculous. Now, on the rare occasion she visits a fast-food joint, she orders a salad and skips the dressing.

And she had to cut back on the number of commitments she had made. She was too busy, and that caused her anxiety, which caused her to eat.

After about three months, her body adjusted to her new diet. When she broke down and ate something she shouldn't have, she found she didn't really enjoy it. And her body couldn't handle eating as much as it had before.

That had been her problem. She overate. Now, when she tried to do that, her body would tell her. "I can't eat all that," she said.

WEIGHT LOSS continued from page 3

Six months later, on her 37th birthday last April, she dropped below 300 pounds. In late November, slightly more than a year after starting the program, she'd lost 130 pounds.

Food has become her friend again. But it's like any other group of friends: Some are good to be around, others – like cupcakes and those pasta dishes with the creamy sauce she so loved – are bad influences. She tries to hang with the good ones and ignore the bad ones. Her program is forgiving, so even when she spends time with the bad boys, she can make up the indiscretion elsewhere in her diet.

She feels a lot lighter now, and she has more energy. "Sometimes," she said, "I want to jump up and down. I never wanted to do that before. I can cross my legs. Oh, my stomach, I can see it!"

The words, and wonder, of a champion. ●