

#### 4. Hernando, Mississippi: A Small Town Remakes Itself

Last year, when Michelle Obama kicked off *Let's Move*, her signature childhood obesity initiative, she had by her side the mayor of a city that was taking aggressive steps to keep its residents fit and healthy with new playgrounds, walking trails, bike paths, as well as a farmers' market and a community garden.

The mayor looked the part: He was young and trim, had a shaved head, and often walked to work from his downtown home.

The city was not Portland, or San Francisco, or Seattle.

It was Hernando, Mississippi.

Over the past five years, Hernando and its mayor, Chip Johnson, have succeeded in making the city of 14,000 an inspiration for all municipalities with not enough resources and high obesity rates.

Johnson, who has no health background — he owns a carpet cleaning business — came to active living accidentally. After winning election in 2005, he was appointed to a regional health council focused on obesity. He was invited to the Southern Obesity Conference, an annual event partially funded by RWJF. “That’s where I had my ‘aha’ moment,” he says. As he listened to speaker after speaker describe the region’s urgent weight problem, Johnson had an epiphany. “I realized,” He said, “that this was something way bigger than I realized.”

Mississippi has the highest obesity rate in the country. More than a third of its adults are obese, as are almost 20 percent of its children.

In some ways, Hernando is not a typical rural Mississippi town. Over the past two decades, it has increasingly become a bedroom community of Memphis, 20 miles to the north. It has a relatively affluent, professional population, and, as a result, has more social and economic resources to support the creation of bike paths and playgrounds.

Even so, Hernando remains a thoroughly Southern place, and even if its obesity rates aren’t as high as Mississippi’s poorest counties, it still has its fair share of fast food, Southern cooking, and sedentary living. The town doesn’t keep its own statistics on obesity, but it’s in Desoto County where a third of adults are obese.

Johnson and other city officials have focused much of their work on making it easier for residents to be active within the context of everyday routines. Although he often gets up at 4 a.m. to exercise, he realizes that this approach doesn’t appeal to everyone. For people to burn adequate calories every day, they must move almost without meaning to, by walking or biking to and

from work or around their neighborhoods.

Hernando began by introducing a design standard requiring sidewalks for all new, and some existing, commercial and residential developments. Research has shown that sidewalks can increase walking by giving pedestrians safe, clearly-marked space to stroll. The city repaired crumbling downtown sidewalks, and the design standard resulted in miles of new sidewalks in suburban developments that previously had none.

With encouragement from Johnson, the city also passed a Complete Streets law that requires new road construction to include consideration of pedestrians and bicyclists. And the city is building almost a mile of sidewalks connecting a lower-income neighborhood to a nearby elementary school, so students can walk to the school more easily.

Over the past three years, Hernando has striped bike lanes on several main streets and added new walking trails in existing parks. “The city has done a lot,” said Bo McAnich, a Hernando resident and bicyclist who helps manage the city’s bicycle club. “Anything to do with bicycling, they highly encourage. There’s been a big improvement since Chip has been mayor.”

In 2006, Johnson convinced city officials to create a parks department — Hernando didn’t have one. Since then, the city has revamped all seven of its parks, adding modern playgrounds to several. KaBoom, a national nonprofit group that works to increase children’s playtime, has recognized Hernando as a one of the country’s most “Playful” cities, for improving its parks and playgrounds.

Three years ago, the city started a weekly farmers’ market, which offers fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats raised by approximately 65 farmers and vendors from North Mississippi. From March to November, about 400 people visit the market every weekend. This spring, to encourage lower-income families to participate, the market began accepting food stamps. The city started a community garden, which is cultivated by a range of community organizations, including churches and youth groups. Much of the food ends up in the kitchens of Hernando’s lower-income residents.

Johnson sees no contradiction between his conservative fiscal beliefs and government involvement in fighting obesity. This year, he notes, Mississippi will spend almost a billion dollars on obesity related healthcare. By 2018, those costs could quadruple, according to state data. “That would bankrupt the

state,” Johnson said. “We need to deal with this. It’s a dollars and cents issue.”

He also argues that reducing obesity rates will increase private investment in Hernando. “We want to recruit corporations to Hernando. They’re not stupid. When they make their decisions, they look at healthcare costs.” Another plus: all those sidewalks and greenways do more than burn calories. They also raise property values. And, Johnson says, getting people out of their houses and moving fosters a sense of community.

Over the past six years, Johnson himself has become a poster boy for active living. He often walks to work, bikes around town, and visits the farmers’ market. He regularly talks to public officials around the state and the country about Hernando’s efforts. His message is simple: Get started now, with the resources you have.

“We are doing the best we can without a lot of money,” he said. “I tell people to go out and do something, and do it now.” And he points out that for enterprising towns and counties, help is available: Hernando has worked with and received funding from a range of private groups, as well as

state and federal agencies. Shelly Johnstone, Hernando’s director of community development, said that over the past six years, the city has received more than \$800,000 from various sources for programs that encourage activity and healthy eating.

Johnson realizes that his policies and programs won’t reach everyone.

***“Your personal health is a personal choice,” he said. “My job is to create an atmosphere and an opportunity for good health. If you want to take advantage of it, that’s great. If you want to stay home on your couch, go ahead.”***

But many residents have bought in. Rev. Michael Minor, the pastor of Oak Hill Baptist Church in Hernando, started Healthy Congregations, which helps local churches set up programs to help members lose weight and improve their health. So far, more than 60 churches from all over North Mississippi have joined. At Oak Hill, members measured a walking track in the church parking lot, and members started a walking club.

“If we can do this in Mississippi,” said Minor, “then we can do it anywhere.”