

PERSONAL COMMENTARY

Dyersburg Makes a Push Against Obesity

By Randy Butler, CEO of the Dyer County, Tennessee, YMCA

DYERSBURG IS LIKE A LOT OF SMALL TOWNS IN AMERICA. MOST PEOPLE MAKE A LIVING BY FARMING OR WORKING IN FACTORIES, AND WE'RE SMALL ENOUGH THAT PEOPLE STILL SAY HELLO ON THE STREET AND WAVE TO EACH OTHER WHEN THEY DRIVE BY. OVERALL, WE'RE NOT A WEALTHY PLACE, BUT WE'RE NOT POOR EITHER.

And somewhere over the past 30 years, a lot of us here gained much too much weight.

Basically, we ate too much and moved too little. Our children watched too much TV, played too many video games, and ate too many french fries and not enough greens. To give you an idea of where things stand: Tennessee is the third fattest state in the country, and Dyer County is one of the least healthy, most overweight counties in the state. More than a third of adults in the county are obese, and almost half of the kids are obese or overweight.

Now we're trying to do something about it.

Last year, the Dyer County YMCA won a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to fight obesity in Dyer County and Dyersburg.

I'm the head of the Dyer County YMCA, and I'm in charge of the project. We're not a large operation, and I have a lot on my plate. I have a total of three full-time employees at the Y, so, for example, when the basement of our rec center flooded this spring, I was down there mopping up.

But luckily, in a small town people know each other, and we're used to cooperating. One of the first things we did was get together a committee of more than 20 town leaders — everybody from bank presidents to church pastors to hospital administrators to middle school PE teachers. We realize that obesity is everybody's problem.

A lot of this is new to us. A few months ago, a couple of us went to Salt Lake City for a conference on active living and obesity. Salt Lake City is a big bicycling city, and I have to admit that seeing so many bicycles on the streets looked a little strange to me. It just wasn't something I was used to. But at the same time, that's what we're pushing for in Dyersburg — more bike lanes, more biking.

I'm a big believer in the do-it-yourself method: Just get started. The community turned an abandoned lumberyard into a farmer's market. An alderman and a couple of private citizens donated some of their unused land for community gardens. We've got four gardens going now.

We've focused on kids, because once you're an adult, it's much harder to lose extra weight. A lot of times, it's not kids' fault that they're overweight. If their parents, schools and communities feed them the wrong foods and don't encourage them to exercise, we can't be surprised when they end up weighing too much.

Parents and communities have to be more involved than they were in the past. I'm 42, and when I was growing up near At-

lanta, we'd go outside on a Saturday morning, we'd spend the day running around, and we wouldn't come home until dusk. Society is different now, and a lot of parents don't allow their kids to do that anymore. So we have to do more to make sure kids get the activity they need.

I love football and baseball, but we want to reach the kids who aren't playing team sports too. You can lose weight with all kinds of activities. For instance, one of our elementary schools began an aerobics class once a week during school. A teacher at a city intermediate school started the "Morning Mile Club," where students walk around the track before classes. The kids started tracking how many miles they walked, which got them excited about what they were doing. Now, on sunny days you can see 100 kids out there walking. One student walked 26 miles in just a few weeks. Teachers tell me that they can tell which days the kids are walking because their behavior is better during class.

We also started a contest with all of our 3rd, 4th and 5th graders. Students keep track of how much exercise they get after school; the class that moves the most wins prizes. The kids tell their parents 'I have to go outside and play.' Everybody in the family starts to realize that daily exercise is really important.

Our cafeterias are also changing. We now give students only fresh fruit snacks — no more cupcakes and candy in our city primary school.

And of course the Y can help too. My favorite example one of our teens who got a membership, started working out and taking classes, and lost close to 100 pounds. It was great to see how his confidence grew. He'd always been withdrawn, but as he lost weight, he really began coming out of his shell.

We're a rural area, and we have a lot of open space, which has some beautiful walking and hiking trails running through it. But right now, not enough people use these trails. We're trying to connect these trails to the places that people live so they can just walk out their door and start moving. Dyersburg is 20 miles from the Mississippi River, and we've been talking about creating a blueway there, a designated water trail for canoeists and kayakers. Paddling definitely counts as exercise.

We know we have a lot more to do. We didn't become fat overnight. It might take 15 or 20 years to fix this problem. Maybe if we keep at it, we'll end up like Salt Lake City, with our downtown streets painted with bike lanes, and packs of bikers pedaling to work every day. I'm sure that's something I could get used to.