

## HEALTHY LIVING

## A weighty issue

## Hispanic children targeted in fitness program

BY MARY LOU PICKEL

Cox News Service

A beach ball sails high in the air inside the gym at Norcross Elementary School in Norcross, Ga., as kids run and dart, trying to keep it off the ground.

Luis Larios, 8, butts it with his head, as if it were a giant soccer ball.

Soon he'll be sweating as he joins about a dozen kids in sit-ups, push-ups and leg bends as part of the Metro Atlanta YMCA's Youth Fit for Life program. The program attempts to address the rising prevalence of childhood obesity.

This is the first time the YMCA's 12-week exercise and health-behavior class has been offered to a group of mostly Hispanic youths. The 5-year-old program has focused on African-American children, said Jim Annesi, program developer and director of wellness advancement for the Metro Atlanta YMCA.

Youth Fit for Life seeks to motivate children to continue physical activity into adolescence, Annesi said.

By working with Norcross Elementary School, whose student population is about 60 percent Hispanic, the YMCA will learn to tailor the program to Hispanics. It's a step that's needed.

Of Georgia's fifth- and seventh-graders, Hispanics have the highest prevalence of obesity, according to a 2006 study coordinated by Georgia State University's Georgia Health Policy Center.

Nationally, Mexican-American boys ages 6 to 11 have the highest prevalence of obesity, according to a 2003-04 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Children are supposed to exercise five

times a week, 60 minutes per day. Only 42 percent of children ages 6 to 11 do so, Annesi said. That percentage drops to 8 percent for kids ages 12 to 15.

Atlanta community workers were alarmed a few years ago when they saw several diabetes cases among Hispanic youths in a Cobb County, Ga., study, said Nicky Rosenbluth, staff development director for the Metro Atlanta YMCA.

In many cases, the children didn't know they had the disease, she said.

The YMCA decided it had to work with the Hispanic community to raise awareness.

No one knows for sure why some groups tend to be more overweight than others. National statistics suggest trends may shift as children become older. One race may have heavier youngsters and thinner adolescents, and another group may show a different trend.

The CDC's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey found that Mexican-American parents are less apt to say no to a child if he complains about what's for dinner, said Bill Dietz, director of the CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity.

"They'd find something else to make sure the child who said he was hungry was fed," Dietz said.

Part of it could be attitudes coming from a culture of deprivation, he said. There's also the notion that a fat baby is a healthy baby, he said.

"Persuading a Mexican-American parent that their child is overfed is not easy," Dietz said, based on focus group findings.

Lifestyle changes for immigrant children could play a role, said Letycia Pastrana, di-



PHOTO BY VINO WONG / COX NEWS SERVICE

To attack the problem of obesity among Hispanic children, the Metro Atlanta YMCA's adjusted its Youth Fit for Life program.

rector of community development and partnerships for metro Atlanta's Latin American Association.

"Once the children come here, the video becomes part of the kid's life and watching TV," Pastrana said. "There's less going outside and playing, not to mention the food."

Rice, beans and tortillas made with lard are staples in the Mexican and Central American diet, Pastrana said. The cuisine uses a lot of oils and grease.

"Our families don't know [it's bad] unless someone gets heart disease," she said. "Then they start eating smarter."

Combine the cuisine with a sedentary American lifestyle and fast food, and the results can be a problem.

The YMCA has not gathered much data about metro Atlanta's Hispanic children and their eating and exercise habits, but it hopes to do so.

Talking about nutrition with Hispanic children can be a challenge because diet materials focus on American foods, Rosenbluth said.

"Most of these kids don't eat an American diet, and if they do, their propensity to obesity is higher," she said.

After the exercise class at Norcross Elementary, Luis and his buddy Jorge Garduno, 9, head to the cafeteria for breakfast. On the menu is either cold cereal or a breakfast pizza, which looks like a white flat bread with yellow cheese on top. The boys pick the pizza. They also get a carton of milk and a cup of orange and pineapple juice.

"Sometimes they give us grape drink," Jorge offered.

What are Luis' favorite foods?

The third-grader says in English: "Hot dogs and pizza," then he adds in Spanish, "spinach!" ■

## Teen lobbies to ease childhood obesity

BY MARY LOU PICKEL

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For some middle schoolers, hearing that P.E. classes are limited to nine weeks a year is good news. But for one committed runner, it was a call to action that stretched from a Cobb County, Ga., principal's office to the halls of Congress and beyond.



PHOTO BY ANDY SHARP / COX NEWS SERVICE

In addition to running, Chandler Converse lifts weights and dances. Her mission includes healthier food choices at schools.

Chandler Converse, 15, didn't succeed in getting that policy changed. But those efforts started her on a quest to boost students' health by promoting physical activity and more nutritious food in schools.

"Kids have a voice," Chandler says. "We need help from adults, sure. But it's our issue."

In the past three years, the east Cobb teen has made it her own, becoming a sought-after speaker at national conferences on childhood obesity. She has shared podiums with others who share her passion, a group as diverse as former University of Georgia football standout Herschel Walker, comedian Chevy Chase and scientists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And she's done it while juggling high school and several performing arts productions a year.

"She's a go-getter," says Denise Reeves, her dance teacher at Pebblebrook High in Mableton, Ga., a magnet school for the performing arts.

Chandler stays fit by running, lifting weights and dancing. Between dance classes and hitting the treadmill at home, she works out about two hours a day.

"As a teenage girl, I know it's not about appearance," she says. "It's about being healthy."

She's eager to share that message. When Chandler speaks to adults, she talks about the invigorated feeling she gets from exercise and how it boosts her ability to focus at school. She started with her middle school principal, then served as one of two students on a committee that drew up wellness

policies for Cobb County schools.

That led to appearances at national conferences on childhood obesity. The percentage of overweight children has tripled in the past three decades, putting them at higher risk for diabetes, heart disease and other health problems. Solutions are being sought, from improving school environments to building communities that encourage walking.

Last year, Chandler testified before a congressional subcommittee looking into school health policies and spoke at the National Press Club as the CDC released its latest survey on school health standards. Now she's working on a book — talking with Dr. Mehmet Oz, co-author of "You: On a Diet"; two former surgeons general; and others for their take on childhood obesity and health — and planning to find a publisher this summer. She's thinking of organizing a 5K run this year to raise awareness.

"From day one, she's been an activist," says her mother, Gayle Converse.

Cynthia Downs, executive director of Cobb's food and nutrition services, watched Chandler in action on the district's wellness committee. Downs calls her one of the most driven and civic-minded students she has worked with.

Still, change comes slowly. Chandler worked to get healthier offerings in vending machines at her middle and high schools, and she's gotten standing ovations at national conferences. But she wants more action.

When she testified before the House subcommittee last year, she talked about delays

in implementing school wellness policies, and how much resistance they faced from entrenched interests.

"I need to convey very strongly that this bureaucracy surrounding this crisis not only is chipping away at our health ... it's chipping away at our dreams," she said.

Downs watched Chandler advocate big changes to benefit children's health when Cobb was drafting its wellness policy. Some got a tough reception.

"A lot of the schools we work with want to reward children with food," Downs says. "She said, 'Just don't do it. It's easy.'"

In some ways, Chandler speaks with the certainty of youth.

"It's always the same thing. Money. Money. ... It's amazing that people put money ahead of children's lives."

In other ways, she's a seasoned lobbyist who chooses her words carefully. She visited Georgia Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson to discuss stronger measures addressing childhood obesity and describes a welcoming reception, with some qualifiers.

"It was just one of many things they have to think about," Chandler says. "It was a little disappointing. It needs to be one of their top priorities."

Still, she is keeping up the struggle. "I'm one person, but one person can do a lot," Chandler says.

"I'm hoping children hear what I say and take it up in their own schools. I'm hoping to rid this country of childhood obesity, but I need some allies." ■