

# INDIAN COUNTRY

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## Cherokee health advocate earns new national award

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TODAY STAFF

SEATTLE—Marcella Morton, Cherokee, was overweight, disliked exercise and lived on junk food. That's the story she tells young people and adults to encourage them to become healthier.

Morton received the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's inaugural Steps Community Heroes Award – 2007 at the annual Steps to a HealthierUS workshop held in Seattle June 6. She was chosen out of a field of 28 nominees and was one of seven award winners.

"I received an e-mail that said I was nominated: I was thrilled just to be nominated. I didn't think I could achieve something like this," Morton said.

Then a message on her voice-mail said she had been selected as a Steps Hero.

"I thought there was a mistake," she said. "I feel like I'm accepting it for my whole tribe. It will mean a lot to my community. They see me on the road when I run and see me when I do yoga."

Morton participates on wellness panels and talks about good nutrition and losing weight. She also encourages people to run or walk, and she teaches yoga.

"I tell my story. I lost my best friend to cancer and promised to do something about my health. I had to deliver," she said.

Once Morton began to walk and make changes in the way she ate, she started to feel healthier.

"The food I ate made me feel so much better. It's a step-by-step process. I lost 60 pounds, got into strength training and did some yoga.

"In my town they refer to me as the fitness nut," she said.

Morton has lived all of her life in Westville, Okla., for the past 38 years with her husband, Leon. She also has two grown children, Shawna and Desire.

"People come up to me and tell me what they have accomplished; they will come up and seek advice, I encourage them. I think I have had an impact on a lot of young people and students in the schools," she said.

Morton works as a school counselor for a nonprofit organization, Educational Talent Search, where she encourages young people to attend post secondary education.

"I can relate to them; it describes me," she said. "I am a minority, I was poor. I've been there.

"I use a lot of running stories and accomplishments to encourage the kids. Nothing is impossible."

Like a good part of the country, Morton lives where there is a lot of obesity, diabetes, asthma and access to bad food, she said.

"A lot of people live in the lower income bracket and it's cheaper to eat bad foods. ... There is hope with the Steps program. ... The Cherokee Nation has a program to stop smoking, a walk program that is open to everyone. They have

clinics to give advice on nutrition. Everything to help people is here," she said.

Morton starts in the schools to get young people interested in nutrition and fitness and she also gets the parents involved.

The award recognizes contributions made by individuals in support of Steps to a HealthierUS, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, coordinated by the CDC, that advances the goal of people living longer, better and healthier lives.

"CDC is excited about this new award and we are pleased to recognize people with such diverse backgrounds, including a minister, a business leader, a husband-wife volunteer team, an American Indian physical fitness enthusiast, a community volunteer and a citizen activist.

"These award recipients showcase the enormous impact that individuals can make in helping communities become stronger and healthier," said Janet Collins, director of the CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

The CDC Steps program offers funding to 40 communities nationwide in support of community-based interventions that focus on reducing obesity, diabetes and asthma and the risk behaviors that contribute to these diseases, such as physical inactivity, poor nutrition and tobacco use.

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