

Fit Cherokee wins national award

Susan Bosch

Phoenix Correspondent

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A decade ago Marcella Morton would have described herself as lazy. Then a junior high social studies teacher, the Westville native would do her work, come home and sit on the couch, eating junk food and watching TV the rest of the night. “I never went outside,” she said.

Wednesday, Morton accepted one of six national awards for her efforts in making health a priority in her community, sharing with an audience of 300 the story of how she promised a dying friend to make her own health a priority. Now 55, Morton is thin and fit, running 25 miles per week as part of her involvement in Cherokee Nation’s Steps program, which aims to educate Cherokees and those in the community about obesity and other health-related issues.

The Steps program and Steps Community Heroes Awards are sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which established the program in 2003 to support healthier communities, the CDC reports in a media release. Like the program name implies, Morton took her health journey one step at a time, she said. The total transformation from couch potato to finisher of the Boston Marathon — in 4 hours and 27 minutes — in 2003 took a while.

In 1997, Morton’s best friend died of breast cancer. Her friend made Morton promise to do something about the 60 pounds extra she carried on her frame. Making good was tough. “I really didn’t want to exercise. I enjoyed all the bad stuff in life,” she said. “I basically lived on Pepsi and loved it.” To Morton, a vegetable meant mashed potatoes smothered in gravy, she said.

Today, the athletic, vibrant woman loves to share the joy she gets from working out and eating right. Besides pounding the pavement each day, Morton also eats the most nutritious food possible, she said. And she doesn’t feel deprived, she added. “Everything in moderation” is her motto. A lifetime member of Weight Watchers, Morton attends meetings as often as possible, generally each week, to hold her accountable for her food habits, exercise and weight maintenance, she said.

“Being healthy is not easy,” said Julie Deerinwater, program manager for the Cherokee Nation’s Steps initiative. Deerinwater, whose staff nominated Morton for the award, was on hand Wednesday in Seattle to hear Morton tell her story to a crowd of more than 300. Tears and a standing ovation followed that story, Deerinwater said. “Marcella is a great, excellent role model for our Cherokee community,” she said.

Had Morton been told 15 years ago that this life she leads now would be hers, she wouldn’t have believed it, she said. Her daughters wouldn’t have believed it either, she added. At the time she began her fitness evolution, Morton was both overweight and afflicted with asthma, a condition that makes breathing difficult.

When she was first notified of her nomination, she e-mailed back saying she was the wrong person, that there had to be lots of other people more qualified, she said. “It’s just really humbling to me,” she said. Morton hopes she is leaving a legacy, she said. She knows she will not be immortalized for cleaning her house; she wants her tombstone to read that she “did something great.”

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