

Human Interest Matte Article: African American audience

Word count: 426 (including title)

Quest for Better Health Helps Change a Community

Nurses are known for helping others. So it should be no surprise that when a Texas nurse decided to make changes to improve her own health, she began to better the health of others as well.

This is the story of Austin resident Shirlet Fowler, a registered nurse who was overweight and had high cholesterol, which put her at risk for heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and other health problems.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), African American adults, like Shirlet, are 1.4 times as likely as Caucasians to be overweight or obese. “This means they are at a higher risk for high blood pressure and chronic diseases such as diabetes,” said Leonard Jack, Jr., PhD, MSc, director of the Division of Community Health at the CDC.

But Shirlet decided not to stay on this path. When she started having pain while picking up her two-year-old daughter, she realized it was time to make a change. She started walking and asked family members and friends to join her.

“It wasn’t easy,” she recalled of that first day, but within six months, her group went from walking a couple miles to five miles every day. The group meets monthly to celebrate, share healthy recipes, and check blood sugar and cholesterol. They enjoy monitoring their goals and socializing while walking.

They also enjoy better health. Several walkers have lost weight, Shirlet’s cholesterol has dropped 100 points, and she can pick up her daughter without pain. She also feels in control of her health for the first time, which has improved her self-confidence and well-being. Today, Shirlet said, “I feel stronger. I *am* stronger.”

The healthy habits Shirlet has adopted set a good example for her young daughter, too, which Shirlet feels is extremely important. “If you don’t have your health, nothing else matters,” she said.

Inspired by the success of the group, Shirlet teamed up with the Alliance for African American Health, an organization that helps make it easier for African Americans to get exercise. She also became a spokesperson for healthy living habits through a partnership with a local medical center and her local school district.

“Shirlet’s story is one of many healthy success stories around the United States,” said Dr. Jack. “The CDC applauds her and all the many other individuals and programs working to improve access to healthy foods, physical activity, and reduce tobacco use and exposure in their communities.”

To learn more about making your community a healthier place, visit www.MakingHealthEasier.org.