

GET A LIFE!
Fighting Childhood Obesity



A Roadmap to Success

Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi

OUR JOURNEY



Tom Pittman, President, CEO

A HEALTHY FUTURE FOR OUR KIDS

No organization was doing anything to prevent childhood obesity in Northwest Mississippi five years ago. The Community Foundation decided to do something.

The problem was that we did not know what to do in our largely rural region. There was no map. We set about creating a road map, which is described in this publication. We did not always know where the next step would take us. We encountered some dead-ends. Only in looking back can we see our route clearly. The purpose of this publication is to describe our productive route— as well as some deadends—in the hope that more organizations will take the journey.

The Community Foundation started on this road in 2005 with its own resources. The real turning point came with a three-year grant in 2007 from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to create and support a regionwide, community-based effort.

The model for our route came from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded research on how the United States moved toward lessening the use of tobacco. There were four stops along the path:

- Awareness: Mississippians needed to know that obesity is a health, academic and economic problem.
- Information: The simple links to healthy eating and active living needed to be made for Mississippi's children.
- Behavior: Actions would need to change to prevent childhood obesity.
- Policies: Changes based on good information would be needed to support better behaviors.

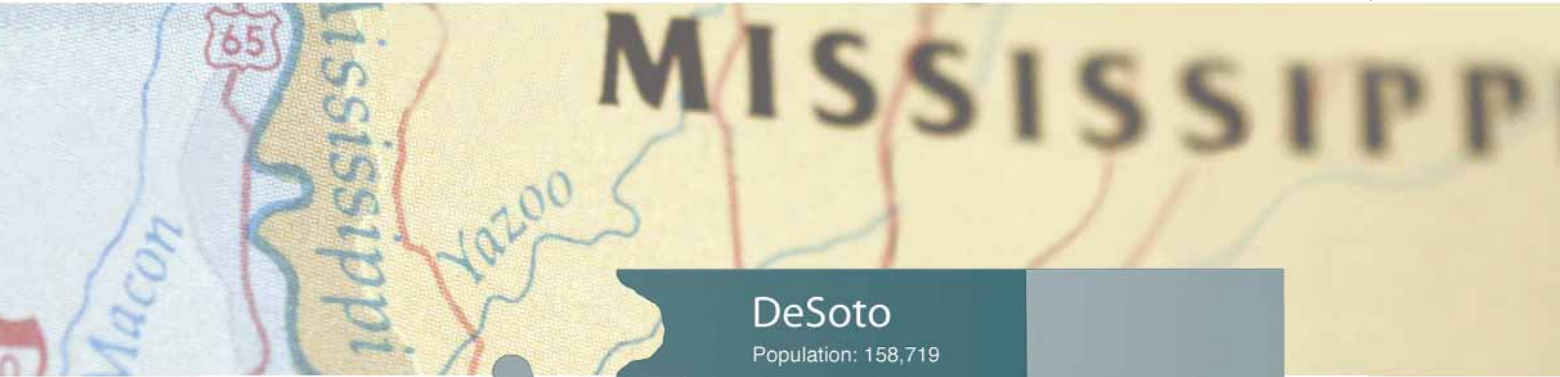
We are not yet where we need to be in Northwest Mississippi to prevent childhood obesity, but now we have many organizations that are aware and informed and seeking to change behaviors and even policies so that our children can have healthier futures.

 *Tom Pittman*

Tom Pittman
President, CEO
Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi

GET A LIFE!

Preventing Childhood Obesity in Northwest Mississippi A Roadmap to Healthier Communities



Source of population information - U.S. Census Bureau



“There is no question about the potential long term impact of obesity on our children, our families, our economy and therefore our futures. Because the future of our communities is our primary concern, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi has stepped up to provide leadership and resources to begin our attack on this growing epidemic in our own local region. We want to equip our children with the tools needed to enjoy better and healthier lives than our current society. Our children.....there is no better investment.”

*—Barbara Easterling Smith, M.D.
Community Foundation Board Past Chairman*

The Landscape of Northwest Mississippi

Northwest Mississippi comprises an eight-county region including DeSoto, Tunica, Tate, Panola, Tallahatchie, Quitman, Marshall and Coahoma.

Geographically, the hills give way to the flat Delta and the Mississippi River. The population of these counties totals 300,000, and their land mass occupies about ten percent of the state with one-half of the total population located in suburban DeSoto County. The population in the other seven counties is largely impoverished, however, they share the common strength of faith where small local churches and ministries possess a strong voice, influencing behavior within countless rural communities.

The Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi serves this eight-county region in Northwest Mississippi, acting as the primary resource and support throughout the region by connecting people who care with causes that matter.

In 2004, we adopted childhood obesity prevention

as one of our primary causes. Why?

Mississippi leads the nation in obesity rates for the sixth straight year. Over one third of Mississippi adults are overweight or obese.

When considering Mississippi children, the numbers are even more dismal. Over 40 percent of Mississippi children age 10 to 17 are overweight or obese.



The South itself seems to perpetuate this obesity trend through cultural traditions and culinary practices like fried foods that are ingrained in the very fabric of southern society. Different races and cultures hold different ideas about health, and providing opportunities for health education remains

essential for this region and for our success.

Our journey of the last six years reveals how the people of northwest Mississippi remain our greatest resource and why our efforts to fight childhood obesity have grown stronger.

Who is our population?

Poverty level above the national average

Predominately African/American

Disparate social capital in rural areas

Communities with limited internet capability





"We began with the simple goal of raising awareness and providing information. Now we are seeing changes in behavior and policies that will sustain this initiative."

—Tom Pittman, President, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi

Our Roadtrip Begins

In 2004, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi began a journey to prevent childhood obesity in its eight-county service region.

Our travels down this road began in essence during two separate conversations with an attorney and retired neurosurgeon. Both conversations resulted in the same suggestion: to address the problem of childhood obesity.

While local conversations lit a spark, early inquiries outside of Northwest Mississippi laid important groundwork. In 2004, Community Foundation President Tom Pittman and Chairman, Dr. Bob Seymour, visited the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in New Jersey to discuss concerns about childhood obesity. From that moment, the Community Foundation board designated childhood obesity prevention a top priority which led to the *Get a Life!* initiative.

Back home in the summer of 2005, the Community Foundation conducted an informal survey throughout our area, asking one simple question: What are you doing to address childhood obesity in your work? Unfortunately, we found no organized effort anywhere within our region.

Get a Life! marks the start of our journey and is our roadmap for continued progress. The work began in DeSoto County, home to the Community Foundation's office and the most populous of the eight county region. While *Get a Life!* targets children ages 3 to 12, anyone who influenced childhood health, including pastors, teachers and parents fell within the scope of this initiative.

- The Community Foundation Board of Directors made several important early moves, including funding \$50,000 to help launch the initiative, contracting with a health consultant to define focus areas, logic models, interventions, and forming a steering committee in DeSoto County comprised of individuals from all walks of life.
- Our early plans centered on building a DeSoto County Community Health Council, conducting focus groups, hiring a part-time *Get A Life!* Director, coordinating three local health summits, and organizing a regional health summit.

Focus Groups: The Power of Gathering People



"Listening, in order to understand why Mississippi families are less active and eat more high-fat foods, is an important step toward change."

—Dr. Ellen Jones

Our Steering Committee needed information regarding the community's perceptions about health, nutrition and obesity which led us to form focus groups. Dr. Ellen Jones, a 25-year professional consultant of the clinical health science field, organized the groups. We targeted three topics: physical education in schools, nutrition education for adults and youth and nutrition policies

children, stakeholders and potential investors. Sessions lasted 45 minutes for the youngest group and 1.5 hours for the adults. Local restaurants donated healthy snacks. A facilitator familiar with local culture and a note taker were present during each session.

We gleaned valuable information from the focus groups; primarily that our lifestyles had outgrown the practicality of our steadfast perceptions about healthy living. Progress hinged on a new direction.

The objectives of the focus groups were:

- to learn what children believed about nutrition and physical activity
- to identify those individuals able to influence a child's health
- to understand how families influence healthy eating
- to identify ways to help families adopt healthy eating practices
- to explore a stakeholder's interest in nutrition
- to understand how partners and funders would be willing to devote resources to a CFNM obesity initiative

- Everyone agreed that fast-paced lives and lack of time contribute to poor health.
- Participants themselves held contradictory information about obesity and weight loss.
- Participants generally think all adolescents experience a "chunky" phase.
- Few children and teens eat before school.
- Young children like P.E.
- Groups realized that obesity does contribute to greater health risks.
- Teens acknowledged portions are too big and parents' lack of exercise.
- Parents believe neighborhoods are poorly designed, kids watch too much T.V. and southern cooking is inherently unhealthy.

Five groups were gathered in DeSoto County. The groups comprised children ages 10-12, children 13-18, parents representing the 3 to 12 year-old

- Funders amenable to wellness curriculums, healthy events and use of social marketing.

Growing operations empower local communities and provide a fresh food network.





What is a Community Health Council?
 It is a group of volunteers from all walks of life within a community including government, health organizations, education, business, human services and the private sector.

This group collaborates, identifies health issues and barriers to progress, supports existing programs, identifies service gaps, gathers data, works with school health councils, coordinates health summits, and evaluates and promotes specific health initiatives.

Creation of a Pilot Community Health Council



A student at play Friar's Point Elementary School.

The DeSoto County Community Health Council became the first health council ever formed in the county or region. It was formed from the foundation's steering committee which had been in place.

Essential to its strength and success, the committed members came from all walks of life, including directors of the county's two largest employers. One member volunteered to chair the council and the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi hired a part-time health director, Dr. Julio Arancibia.

With this group in place, the DeSoto County Community Health Council organized and held three local health summits:

- School Health Council Summit
- Business Health Summit
- Faith-based Health Summit

Local DeSoto County Schools Superintendent, Milton Kuykendall, participated alongside his principals for the day-long School Health Council Summit, strengthening the public/private relationship.

During this same time, the council worked closely with funding partners Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation, the Bower Foundation and General Mills Champions for Healthy Kids to offer SPARK training and equipment to pre-schools in conjunction with the First Regional Library's Early Childhood Resource & Referral Center and a pre-school nutrition program.

The DeSoto County Community Health Council laid the foundation for the creation of councils in the other seven counties of our service region, allowing us to expand *Get a Life!* and to pave the way for the first-annual Regional Health Summit.

*SPARK (Sports, Play and Active Recreation for Kids) represents a collection of exemplary, research-based physical activity programs. The SPARK study is supported by the Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institute of Health as a counter to heart disease and childhood obesity. The daycare provider population and schools serve as models for testing dissemination and diffusion of this model. The Community Foundation fills the role of connecting researchers, advocates, and evidence based practice.

Paving the Way for a Regional Health Summit

With the support of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation and The Dreyfus Health Foundation, *Get A Life!* held the first Regional Health Summit in November 2006 in Clarksdale, Mississippi. This marked the first opportunity for regional collaboration and more than 90 percent of those who attended indicated they would return for a future summit.

As a result of the Regional Health Summit, Community Health Councils were formed in the seven-county area (modeled after the DeSoto County Council). Council members from each county designed an Action Plan responding to a

particular need in their respective county related to childhood obesity prevention. Each Council received a \$10,000 grant and returned home to work on their individual Action Plans. (Plans detailed in County Profiles)

Another effort led to the development and distribution of "Community Snapshots", a survey to discover the healthy eating and active living aspects of communities in the counties. This tool, developed in cooperation with Delta State University, Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi, provided the first assessment tool to be used regionally.

Cyndi Pittman, local media professional, works to help educate Cissy Franklin and Rob Benthall about the benefits of fresh vegetables.





A Wider View: Expanding *Get A Life!* with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

In 2007, our newly-formed partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation paved the road to expand *Get A Life!* into the Mississippi Delta through a childhood obesity prevention grant.

The scope of work for *Get A Life!* expanded to include focus groups in four of the remaining seven counties. Several common themes were identified including:

- Schools and churches are among the top two trusted sources for information including health.
- African Americans believe thin children or adults are "sick or poorly".
- Financial constraints are a determinant with regard to food choices/purchases.

-Many associate working the land and gardening with poverty.

With Community Health Councils established in each of the eight counties, the Regional Health Director Judy Belue recalls the early challenges for each county and their Councils.

"It took one to two years for the Councils to gel and begin to embrace the concepts. In time they embraced the important role of local health champions."

Fledgling groups perhaps knew each other or about other efforts within a county, but they sometimes worked in competition instead of a spirit of collaboration. This led to a duplication of

efforts, frustration, and lack of energy that prevented real progress being realized.

With the expansion of *Get A Life!* we were able also to:

- Train and implement health ministries
- Compile results from the county Action Plans
- Utilize 'community snapshots' as benchmarks
- Record the progress of School Health Councils
- Hire a full-time regional health director
- Leverage additional funding

Progress and outcomes in each county vary according to the different levels of support, existing sustainable coalitions and the implementation of Action Plans. We've witnessed the power of local autonomy and information sharing to overcome barriers and find long term solutions, as each county profile details in the following pages.

Across our geography, we learned using many forms of communication best fits our region's needs. In more populated areas with greater online access, we take advantage of social media, email, and online marketing. In rural areas with limited access, we chose to rely on print media, people and organizations to deliver our vision. Staying connected across the entire region involves a combination of all media and the ability to adapt.

Michael Camponova coaches a student at Friar's Point Elementary.





DeSoto County

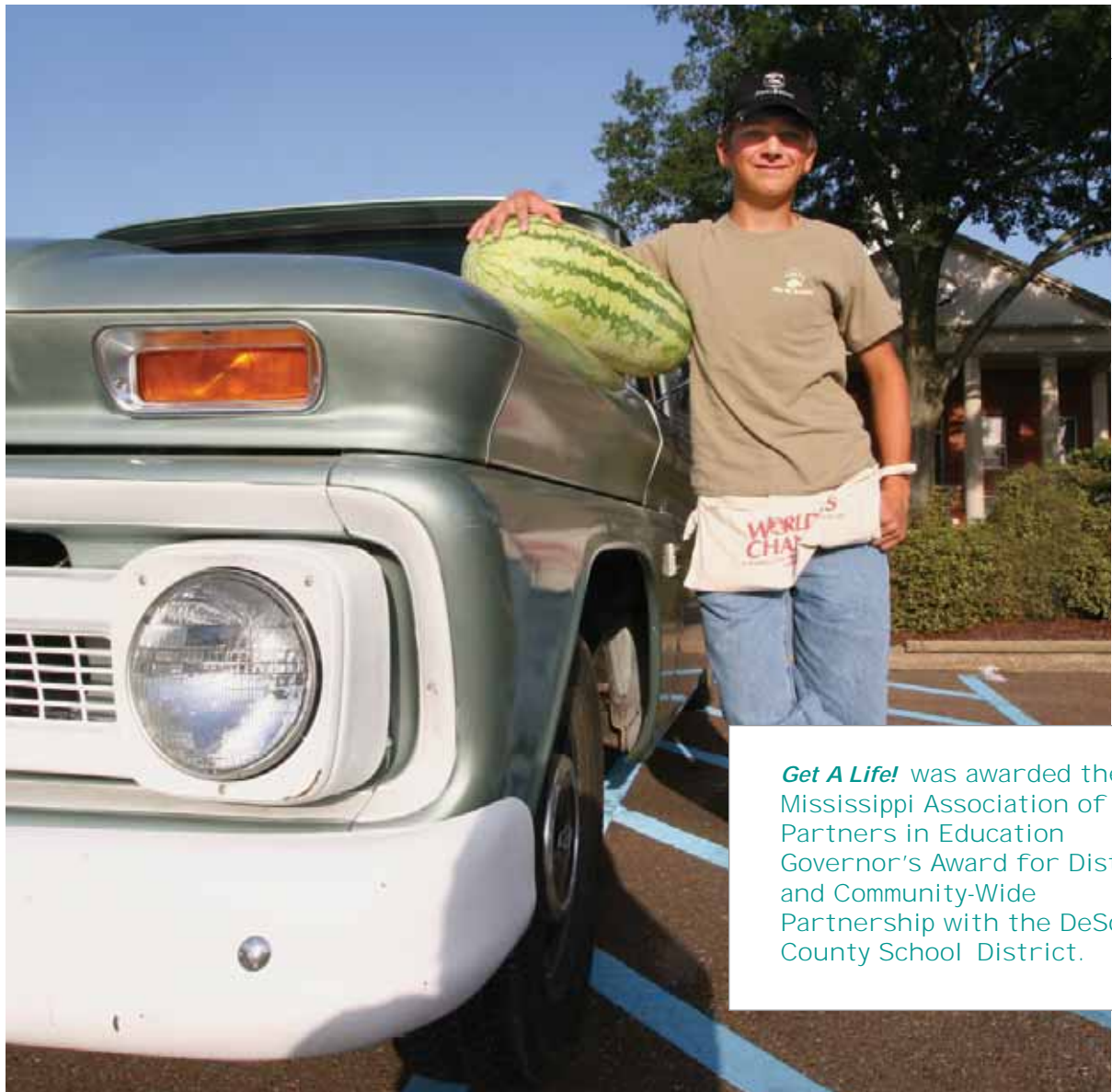
Population: 158,719
Poverty Rate: 8%
Less Than High School Education: 15.8%



DeSoto County, occupying the upper northwest corner of Mississippi, has experienced rapid population and economic growth over the last decade. The 158,719 residents differ from other counties. With higher levels of education and median incomes, residents in general possess greater local resources and professionals often engage in business on a national level.

Health challenges relate more to the unprecedented growth. Demand has outpaced services in both the schools and healthcare community. Home to the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, DeSoto County has historically set the pace for the region, providing strong, insightful leadership.

In June 2010, The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation named DeSoto County's Hernando as the "Healthiest Hometown in Mississippi" award recipient. The Foundation established the award to encourage and reward exemplary community health and wellness and to assist Mississippi municipal leaders in their efforts to make their communities – and ultimately the state of Mississippi – a healthier place to live.



Get A Life! was awarded the Mississippi Association of Partners in Education Governor's Award for District and Community-Wide Partnership with the DeSoto County School District.

Milestones for DeSoto County include:

- Creating the first Community Health Council by recruiting 25 community members
- Working with the First Regional Library Early Childhood Resource & Referral Center providing pre-school nutrition and physical activity programs through General Mills Champion for Healthy Kids, The Bower Foundation and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation grants
- Providing Wii technology to nine elementary schools
- Sponsoring three health summits
- Hosting the first Greenways Symposium in 2008
- Supporting school and community gardens and the Hernando Farmers Market
- Raising awareness about obesity to a national level, attracting worldwide media and political interest
- Initiating an online *Monthly Health Campaign as a resource for all ages on nutrition and physical activity
- Recognizing a Monthly Health Champion
- Supporting the construction of school gardens in all 17 elementary schools by Earth Day 2011
- Organizing conferences and trainings for political and faith leaders to discuss childhood obesity prevention

*Created by Dr. Heather Chambliss, Faculty, Department of Health and Sport Sciences, The University of Memphis; Collaborating Scientist, Division of Research, The Cooper Institute, and member of the DeSoto County Community Health Council



Coahoma County

Population: 26,936
Poverty Rate: 30%
Less Than High School
Education: 30%



Newly-constructed hoop house on the grounds of Clarksdale High School.

Principal Sherry Coleman dubbed the school a "No Fry Zone" when the new ovens were installed.

Coahoma County borders the Mississippi River and is home to 26,936 residents and the Northwest Mississippi Regional Medical Center. With one third of the population living below the poverty line, community resources to address problems like obesity have been limited. Nonetheless, leadership for the Coahoma County Community Health Council has been successfully driven by Lela Keys, a retired healthcare professional and dedicated volunteer.

Achievements of the Coahoma County Council include:

- Providing physical education equipment to Friars Point, Booker T. Washington and Kirkpatrick Elementary schools.
- Sponsoring three workshops for food service personnel in city and county school districts to train staff in ways to encourage students to eat fruits and vegetables in their cafeterias.
- Providing funding for 'I'm Moving, I'm Learning' training for Head Start Centers in the region.
- Funding a year-round growing project at Clarksdale High School during the school year and summer break including a hoop house, raised beds and traditional gardening.
- Promoting youth events such as the Teen Iron Chef competition.
- Supporting the local farmers market where vegetables from the growing project are sold weekly by students.

Recognized in 2009 as the first Coahoma County Health Champion, Friars Point Elementary earned the award for transforming their entire campus with funding from The Bower Foundation to purchase Combi ovens for the school kitchen, add a staff wellness exercise room and routinely provide salads and fruit snacks in the school cafeteria. Principal Sherry Coleman dubbed the school a "No Fry Zone" when the new ovens were installed. Project Fit America equipment and curriculum, funded by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation, was installed on campus for students to use during school and for after-hour use by residents.

Down A Side Road in Coahoma County... A Success Story

One morning, P.E. teacher Michael Camponova arrived at Friar's Point Elementary school ready to start his day.

"My principal told me I had to attend a meeting that evening. She said you're on the community health council," recalls Camponova.

Armed with little information and unsure of his role in this new group, Camponova arrived at the Clarksdale meeting to find 12 women---and himself. He decided earlier he would simply listen and try to gauge his role, rather than speak up. "This was all brand new to me."

Still uncertain at the end of the first meeting, he found Lelia Keys and queried her about his participation.

"She said, 'we want to know what you think and what you need in your school to get kids up and moving'. I had always worked with minimal equipment and certainly didn't have anyone asking me what I needed," says Camponova.

The group continued to meet, and slowly over time, Camponova began to understand the overall goal of the Community Health Council and the benefit to his students.

With funding from the *Get A Life!* grant, Camponova received more equipment and the Dance Dance Revolution program. "It was a gold mine because the kids loved it and they didn't realize they were exercising like crazy."

Camponova soon witnessed other changes at his school. With the help of the Bower Foundation, the school removed all frying equipment and now bakes all dishes instead.

Nearly three years after that first meeting, Camponova has noticed real changes. "I've always been part of the school health council but it has never been as active as it is now." Camponova meanwhile plans to use new badminton, volleyball and tether ball equipment during the 2010-2011 school year.

The school eventually received grant money from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Mississippi Foundation to fund Project Fit America. Through a Bower Grant, Friars Point also implements FitnessGram, testing students in activities such as push-ups, sit-n-reach box and running.

With all the changes, Camponova has noticed something different with his students. "In the afternoons after lunch, kids were so sluggish. Since the food changes, I've noticed they seem to be less tired in the afternoon and seem to be having more fun overall."

Like many people faced with a new responsibility and change, Camponova

has moved from reticent and cautious to excited and enthusiastic about the new health initiatives.

Still part of the Coahoma County Community Health Council, Camponova himself has become a champion of health.





Panola County

Population: 35,245
Poverty Rate: 22%
Less Than High School
Education: 36.5%

Panola County, population 35,245 is unique, with county seats located in both Batesville and Sardis. Panola County's road to building a strong, sustained health initiative and Community Health Council continues to evolve as membership

declined following completion of their original Action Plan and then refocused overtime on a broader audience than school sites alone.

Local efforts initially targeted physical education staff at city and county schools, then widened to include three Boys and Girls Club sites, faith based organizations and the community in general.

Awareness is growing about healthy initiatives and success has been through separate projects, rather than a developed plan.

Tangible outcomes include:

- Providing SPARK equipment and training for staff members from each local school
- Funding weekend backpacks with healthy foods for Boys and Girls Club members in the community of Sardis
- Sponsoring TRIPLE PLAY training for Boys & Girls Club staff from eight clubs in the region
- Engaging Allied Students from South Panola High School in the first annual Healthy Congregations conference where they demonstrated for better health with the "I Will Not Be Silent Campaign" to highlight the negative health consequences brought on by childhood obesity
- Helped start a new Farmers Market in Batesville which opened June 30, 2010 with 28 vendors and strong support from community residents.



PANOLA COUNTY SCHOOLS, Pope Elementary and Junior High, HAVE ENGAGED IN HEALTHIER US CHALLENGE COMPETITION FOR A BRONZE RECOGNITION.



Tate County
Population: 27,337
Poverty Rate: 14%
Less Than High School
Education: 28.3%



The Tate County
Community Health
Council reached 986
Local children
through Body Walk.

Tate County, located just south of DeSoto County, is home to over 27,337 residents. Farm land largely surrounds Senatobia, the largest city with a retail and industrial economic base.

The Tate County Community Health Council's accomplishments include:

- Designing and conducting Active Family Nights in schools
- Purchasing Dance Dance Revolution equipment for five schools
- Participating in an annual health fair to promote healthy eating and active living
- Approving and formally recommending expansion of Mississippi State University Extension Service's Mississippi in Motion throughout the County
- Engaging Middle School students in a health "demonstration"
- Supporting Body Walk, an event reaching 986 local children
- Engaging youth in tree plantings at Coldwater Park
- Advocating a new farmers market in Coldwater
- Participation by area churches in the Healthy Congregations initiative



Marshall County

Population: 36,900
Poverty Rate: 18%
Less Than High School Education: 40%



Marshall County is located in the furthest north-east part of our service region. With a population of 36,900, the county unfortunately claims the unhealthiest numbers in Mississippi. Out of 82 counties in the state, Marshall County ranks last in public health according to the Mississippi Department of Health.

The Marshall County Community Health Council hit the ground running in 2005 by creating an Action Plan for childhood obesity prevention that focused on targeting children from Head Start to 6th grade. Their accomplishments include:

- Developing curriculum and providing education about childhood obesity, its consequences and solutions, through Parent Teacher Organizations in every local school
- Launching an annual Stamp Out Childhood Obesity event to engage elementary school children in a wide variety of physical activities and providing healthy snacks along with good

nutrition information. It's hands-on and gets the message across!

- Purchasing Dance Dance Revolution equipment for use in churches, schools, after school programs and community groups
- Introducing and funding training for ICS Head Start, the largest Head Start provider in the state, to launch "I'm Moving, I'm Learning"
- Advocating through a fellow council member who is also the local WIC representative to support

"Our challenges have to do with our size. We're a big county with lots of land and we struggled initially with how to make the greatest impact for our children."

—Lorena Adams, RN, Chair of the Marshall County Community Health Council and School Nurse

- increasing benefits for fresh fruits and vegetables for recipients
- Supporting the renovation of a greenhouse on Byhalia High School campus to enable vegetable production throughout the school year
- Participating in an annual community wide health fair to promote healthy eating and active living
- Advocating for starting a local farmers' market in the largest city in the county.

**I'm Moving, I'm Learning is a pro-active approach for addressing childhood obesity in Head Start children. The program seeks to provide moderate to vigorous physical activity every day, improve the quality of movement activities intentionally planned and facilitated by adults, and promote healthy food choices every day.*



I'm Moving, I'm Learning..... A Statewide Success Story



Since discovering and using “I’m Moving, I’m Learning”, Head Start teacher Brenda Bowman has taken a committed, excited interest in the exercise songs and program. Bowman, who has over 14 years experience teaching Head Start children, likes the structure and lessons behind the program.

While most people think teachers prefer kids to sit down and be quiet, nothing could be further from the truth in Bowman’s Head Start classroom at the Marjean Taylor-Myatt Head Start Center in Holly Springs, Mississippi. “I’m Moving I’m Learning” was introduced to the Mississippi Delta by *Get A Life!*

“It’s so hands on with the kids and I have incorporated the program into my lesson plans,” says Bowman.

And no doubt, the kids know it and love it. When she hits the button, the group falls into place, clapping and singing songs that require them to stand, stretch, skip, bend and sing.

What Bowman appreciates is the basics of “I’m Moving, I’m Learning”.

“Every three or four year old cannot skip. The exercises break that down to show the transitions and merging. We always work in a group, practicing kicking and catching balls.”

When Bowman and her class are in the midst of

their daily routing, glances from passer-bys in the hallway aren’t unusual. It’s loud, the kids are singing—it generally

appears to be a fun, controlled chaos. Not only have the kids learned the songs and motions, they definitely know “Mr. Choosy”, the cartoon character that Bowman has plastered all over the classroom to remind children about their food choices.

“I’m a firm believer that if we begin early in life, the kids will adopt to it,” says Bowman.

Each day in the late morning, Bowman gathers her kids on a colorful mat in the room and they work through the songs. She encourages them to move, act out the song as she leads the group. A song with Spanish words doesn’t slow the children down as they easily shout out the foreign words mixed with English. When the song plays about a bear chasing the class, the group is nearly jogging in a large circle.

Bowman says that the “I’m Moving, I’m Learning” program has affected even her.

“I’ve lost 15 pounds since I started this with them!” Always open to new ideas, particularly when it comes to nutrition and exercise for her class, Bowman smiles her signature wide smile.

“This program has worked out wonderfully for me as a teacher.”



Tallahatchie County

Population: 12,638
 Poverty Rate: 27%
 Less Than High School Education: 45%



The 'So Fresh So Clean' garden at the Boys & Girls Club Charleston Unit, Director, Nedra Jackson.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation is an organization with one primary goal : to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015. By working with industry leaders, community leaders, schools, doctors, and families, this organization hopes to empower kids to make healthier lifestyle choices. The organization was founded in 2005 by the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation.

Tallahatchie County is located furthest south in our service area where the county's sparse population of 12,638 spreads across vast Delta farm land.

With limited resources, this county has nonetheless found success.

By leveraging existing networks, the Community Health Council has made inroads and developed partnerships with the Boys and Girls Club, schools, wellness councils, and Head Start centers.

Partnerships have resulted in:

- Junk food-free Wednesdays and health screenings at East and West Tallahatchie Schools.
- Offering student coupons for a healthy snack at

Subway.

- Providing Dance Dance Revolution equipment to two schools.
- Physical education equipment and supplies to both Head Start centers in the county.
- Participation by Charleston Middle School in the Alliance for A Healthier Generation competition.
- Providing Wii technology to Charleston Middle School.
- Installing a raised bed garden at the Boys and Girls Club.

- Members of the Council now volunteer on six School Health Councils and work closely with the Alliance for A Healthier Generation.





Quitman County

Population: 8,391
Poverty Rate: 28%
Less Than High School
Education: 44.9%



Quitman County is a rural county with a population of 8,391 stretching across 400 square miles.

The Quitman County Community Health Council invested their seed money in the OrganWise Guys Inc. curriculum which focuses on science-based nutrition, physical activity and healthy lifestyles. They partnered with MS State University Extension Service staff and their local Head Start center to provide the training to parents and staff of Head Start.

The Community Health Council implemented the following:

- Sponsored a community-wide health fair to raise awareness and provide information about the benefits of maintaining a healthy weight
- Screened, provided information, and monitored 117 adults and children for one year in conjunction with OrganWise Guys curriculum
- Sponsored a community-wide health celebration upon completion of one year training
- Facilitated ongoing use of OrganWise Guys in an after-school program
- Provided partial funding for training in "I'm Moving, I'm Learning" for ICS Head Start staff

Area growers have collaborated on the installation of hoop houses on local farms. Plans are in motion to market fresh produce locally and to utilize a vegetable processing plant by Alcorn State. With our support, at-risk youth have received GPS and GIS technology training to help with mapping the area.

Even in their infancy, growing operations like local farmer, Frank Wilbourn's, have attracted national interest. During 2010, visitors came from WHY Hunger, New York and the National Good Food Network, a project of the Wallace Center at Winrock International.

Quitman County's Community Health Council transformed itself from the original membership. As the Healthy Congregations initiative grew, members of this group became active in local growing projects, alongside some of the original council members. While the Community Health Council may not meet as a formal group, the idea of gathering people for a common cause has gained momentum.



Tunica County

Population: 10,436
Poverty Rate: 24%
Less Than High School
Education: 39.5%

Children enjoy swimming at the Tunica County Health and Wellness Center.



"We initially thought we'd develop a whole other group but discovered it would be more efficient to adopt an existing program and structure."

—Dr. Gene Osborn, Tunica County Healthcare Authority, CEO

Tunica County borders the Mississippi River. The county is an interesting study, unique from all other counties for one reason: gaming. Once propelled into the national spotlight by Jesse Jackson for the impoverished "Sugarditch" area, Tunica today enjoys economic stability and jobs.

Over 8 million tourists visit Tunica each year, dwarfing the local population of 10,436 residents. Long before the childhood obesity prevention campaign, Tunica had already constructed three recreation centers in White Oak, Dundee and the Wellness and Aquatics Center in Tunica. With greater access and infrastructure, Tunica chose another unique route.

Tunica County Community Health Council chose to integrate a health campaign into the county's existing Community Health Care

Authority which was formed in 2006 by the County Board of Supervisors. This group oversees healthcare services, including two health clinics and a contract-ambulance service.

Tunica's Council chose to work through the Boys and Girls Club to implement their Action Plan. To date the Council has:

- Provided *CATCH curriculum and training for Boys and Girls Club staff.
- Purchased Dance Dance Revolution equipment for youth programs and hosted competitions between Club sites to encourage participation
- Received local and national recognition for a comprehensive staff wellness program through the county government.

*CATCH (Coordinated Approach To Child Health) is an evidence-based, coordinated school health program designed to promote physical activity, healthy food choices, and prevent tobacco use in children from preschool through grade 8.



Communities who chose to institutionalize health councils may find limitations with regards to government guidelines and health agendas. They may also find opportunities for collaboration that might not otherwise be possible.



Valeria Hawkins (l) and Dr. Michael Minor participate in a Regional Health Council meeting along with Council Members (back l to r) Mayor Chip Johnson, Dr. Gene Osborn and Judy Bland.

Merging Together: Building a Regional Health Council

With Community Health Councils in each of the eight counties, our next move led us to a regional level and the establishment of the first Regional Health Council. This council has proved essential as it serves as a common resource and idea-sharing venue for the entire eight-county region.

The council formed by gathering at least one representative from each of the eight Community Health Councils, *Get A Life!* staff, and many organizations throughout the state working on childhood obesity prevention. By meeting quarterly at different locations throughout our region, consistent collaboration and communication has been established.

Hernando's Mayor Chip Johnson, member of the Regional Health Council, helped First Lady Michelle Obama kick-off her "Let's Move" anti-obesity campaign during the White House announcement in 2010.

Mayor Johnson has addressed state, national and international audiences, sharing how his local government has successfully committed to improving community health.

As a group, the council decided to focus on three main priorities that held the greatest potential impact for the prevention of childhood obesity:

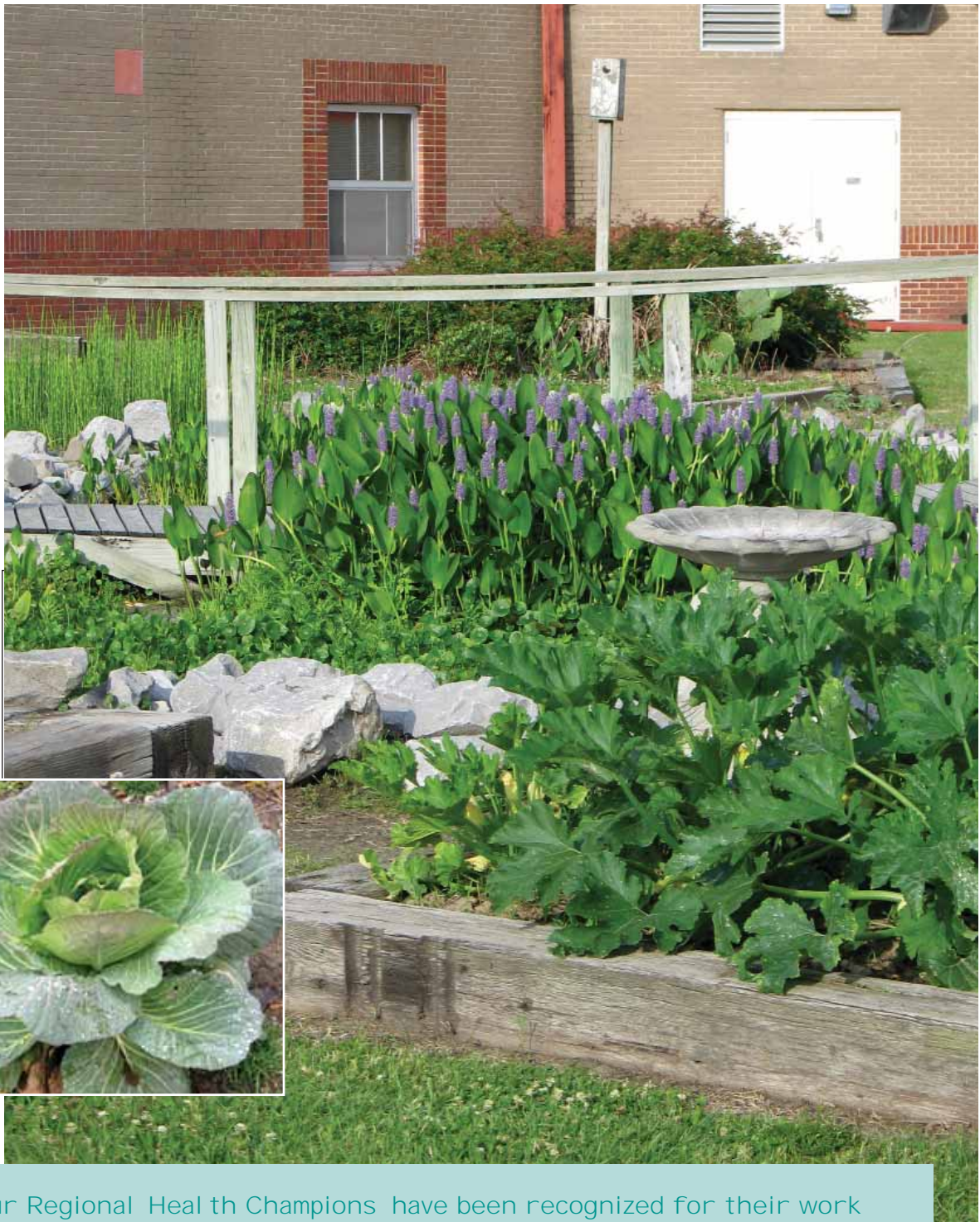
- Promoting healthy eating and active living within the faith community.
- Increasing vegetable production and distribution in the region.
- Engaging elected officials in making their communities healthier.

The Council brought together more than 33 local elected municipal officials to learn how their policies and built environment could reduce childhood obesity. They were guided by Leon Andrews from the national League of Cities and the Director of the Office of Preventive Health for the Mississippi State Department of Health, Dr. Victor Sutton.

More than 30 growing projects have been established including church and community gardens, hoop houses for extended season growing, and raised bed gardens in schools.

Existing greenhouses in two schools have been refurbished for vegetable production and farmers markets have started or expanded in several counties.

Health Ministries have been established in nearly 60 congregations throughout eight counties.



Our Regional Health Champions have been recognized for their work within communities, schools, government agencies, and/or worksites:

- Mayor Chip Johnson and the City of Hernando
- ICS Head Start
- Tunica Healthcare Authority
- The Alliance for a Healthier Generation
- Mississippi State University Extension Service
- Quitman County School District

Healthy Congregations: The Crossroads of Faith and Health

Faith organizations and churches dot the Southern landscape, serving many times as the sole unifier in a small community. Recognizing the power of these existing resources and communities, the Community Foundation established *Get A Life!*'s Healthy Congregations with a Robert Wood Johnson faith based grant awarded in 2008.

The mission is to embed health in the ministry of the faith community and foster the advocacy for policy and environmental changes to promote active living and healthy eating.

Stepping forward as the first chairman was Dr. Michael Minor, a health champion in his own right. As pastor of a small church in Hernando, Dr. Minor has been able to connect with the National

Baptist Convention and other denominations to make Healthy Congregations 600 churches strong.

In 2009, a regional conference was held with over 400 faith leaders and lay health advocates in attendance. Since then, the progress made by Healthy Congregations has been tangible in many areas. A second conference is scheduled for October 2010. The accomplishments of Healthy Congregations reach well beyond the doors of local churches to include:

- Training local congregation leaders in establishing healthy ministries
- GIS mapping of areas where factors such as education, poverty and lack of access to healthy choices contribute to obesity
- Reaching out to engage congregations in locations with the greatest disparities
- Supporting vegetable-growing projects including community gardens, hoop houses, raised beds, church gardens and an array of growing projects in schools
- Incorporating health and wellness curriculum into vacation Bible school
- Implementing food changes at church functions, such as the elimination of fried foods
- Creating walking tracks and walking groups at local churches
- Making seed funds available to promote best practices within congregations who participate in health ministry training
- Designing usable tools like an online Garden Tool Kit and an annual Health Ministry Planning Guide.

The mission is to embed health in the ministry of the faith community and advocate for community and policy changes in their communities.





Celebrating the graduation of the first Faith Community Nurse/Lay Health Advocate Training.

Faith Community Nurse/Lay Health Advocate Training

A Healthy Congregations program that has yielded great success is the Faith Community Nurse/Lay Health Advocate Training.

Through the combined efforts of the Community Foundation, North Central Mississippi Area Health Education Center, Northwest Mississippi Community College, and area churches, 26 lay health advocates and registered nurses received scholarships to participate in Faith Community Nurse/Lay Health Advocate Training.

Training was offered one Saturday each month from November 2009 to February 2010. Due to the overwhelming response, a second session of training began in June 2010.

Healthy Congregations has galvanized members of the faith community within our network to make healthier personal choices alongside advocacy for policy and environmental changes that will help create healthier communities.



Oak Hill Baptist Church, located south of Hernando.



"We're Better Together."

*—Dr. Michael O. Minor, Pastor at
Oak Hill Baptist Church and
Chairman of Healthy
Congregations*

A Glimpse Inside the Doors of a Mississippi Church

Oak Hill Baptist Church, south of Hernando, represents the typical rural congregation, averaging about 100 members on Sunday. Challenges for these parishes include relative isolation, older structures with lack of ancillary buildings, limited funds, no full-time preachers, and historically, little emphasis on health issues. These churches, however, have particular advantages. Small, with no hierarchical structure, these churches operate autonomously which allows for independent decision-making about programs. In short, they are open and accessible to change. Second, existing resources within churches like the Rising Sun Usher Federation provide a solid, established network through which obesity initiatives can be filtered.

At Oak Hill Baptist, led by its Pastor, Dr. Michael Minor, the congregation has embraced having health and wellness promoted from the pulpit. Monthly health emphasis, using their paved parking lot as a walking track, establishing a church garden, and providing healthier foods at church functions are just a few of the tools they are using to promote health. "Health warriors" at Oak Hill have helped establish health ministries in sister congregations.



Healthy Congregations in Motion

Four years ago, Darrell started feeling bad. The 280-pound 16 year old African American from Hernando felt sleepy, thirsty and lethargic for a week.

Concerned, his mother Sandra took him to a doctor, thinking perhaps he was anemic. "They tested his blood sugar and it was so high, it wouldn't even register on the test," says Sandra.

Darrell spent nearly two weeks at Baptist East Hospital in Memphis where he was diagnosed with diabetes. Despite the family's history of diabetes, it was the last diagnosis any of the family expected.

"I knew nothing about diabetes," says Darrell. He would soon learn.

Before he left the hospital, he learned about the disease, his new diet requirements, and how to administer his insulin shots which he gives himself as needed. And that wasn't all. "I called my husband from the hospital and told him to get rid of all the food that Darrell couldn't eat," says Sandra.

Four years later, Darrell at age 20 weighs nearly a hundred pounds less at 170 pounds. That call from the hospital served as a wake-up call for the entire family. Even though Darrell was the only confirmed diabetic in the family, that was enough for Sandra. "We're all family and it could be any one of us. Whatever we needed to do, we were all going to do it", said Sandra. That meant changes even for younger brother DeWayne.

Today, the household has no white sugar in the sugar bowl, sugared sweets or white bread. Gone are white potatoes, too. "I sure miss my white

potatoes and chocolate," says DeWayne.

Instead, the family now eats sweet potatoes, sugar-free desserts and drinks.

For Darrell, the biggest adjustment was breakfast. "I had to eat breakfast which I never did before."

Sandra has found clever ways to control portions, using a tray or paper plate with dividers, much like those in a cafeteria. She says the family focuses on portion control as much as the food choice itself. Darrell and his step-father have also changed their cooking habits, switching to boiling or baking as opposed to frying. "The family has begun walking, in part response to our local congregation's efforts to become healthier", says Sandra. They attend

New Bethany Missionary Baptist Church, a member of *Get A Life's* Healthy Congregations.

Darrell, who graduated from Hernando High in 2009, works at the local Pizza Hut. When extremely active or under stress, he has learned to watch his sugar levels. Darrell, who loves to dance and is currently studying graphic design, has one key piece of advice for other teenagers.

"Go play and be active. Be active instead of just playing video games."

Sandra adds one suggestion for parents "Be aware. Be more alert about diabetes and its symptoms."

For this family, one diabetes diagnosis has changed a life.

But in reality, it has changed an entire family.

*"Go play and be active.
Be active instead of just
playing video games."*



A Changing Landscape: Affecting Policy

Over the last five years, ideas of healthy eating, active living and connecting people and nature has really taken root—literally. We have witnessed increased awareness about green spaces and greenways, farmers markets, growing operations, conservation and recycling.

“I’m amazed what has happened. Five years ago we couldn’t find one organization in Northwest Mississippi doing anything to prevent childhood obesity. Today, we have schools, churches, city governments and countless other partners doing good work that is enabling our children to lead active lives and eat better.”

—Tom Pittman, President, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi

We believe success begins at a grassroots level, in classrooms, backyards and on basketball courts. As we move forward, we look back at accomplishments in which we played a part and provide sustainability for miles to come. They include:

- The establishment and maintenance of growing projects including hoop houses, raised beds, and community gardens

- An online Tool Kit to help communities and young gardeners plant a garden
- Construction of commercial hoop houses in Quitman and Coahoma Counties
- Creation of bike lanes, trails and safe routes to school
- Plans to improve current park systems, like in Olive Branch, to increase connectivity and green spaces in our region
- The establishment of the North Mississippi Land Trust
- The creation of the Audubon Mississippi Education Endowment to support recreation for the Coldwater River watershed area
- Increased participation in Natural Resource Initiative conferences and events
- The planting of church gardens through *Get A Life!*'s Healthy Congregations
- The development of the AW Bouchillon Institute for Community Planning providing education to elected officials on policy and environmental changes that lead to healthy communities

The 2009 Mississippi Kids Count Data Book and Summit highlighted *Get A Life!* as one of four success stories in Mississippi focusing on the health of our children.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant has leveraged over \$650,000 additional funds utilized for childhood obesity prevention.

After the Grant and Toward Healthy Kids Healthy Community

After nearly six years, Mississippi is making progress in the fight against childhood obesity. Success in large part comes from increased awareness, sharing of information, changes in behaviors and adopted policies. Today, we face the challenge of changing institutionalized culture using the existing tools and resources.

In December 2009, the Community Foundation was awarded a four-year grant of Healthy Kids Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to implement *Get A Life!*'s Partners and Pathways for Healthy Communities. The grant targets active living and healthy eating policy and environmental changes in the tri-county area of DeSoto, Tate and Marshall, the Upper Coldwater River Watershed.

We are making inroads by affecting policy and environmental changes that build healthier schools, churches, communities and, ultimately, healthier lifestyles and exploring environmental development that supports active living and healthy eating.

We have witnessed or facilitated policy changes with regards to:

- Revised farmers market sales tax legislation which passed in early 2010 and eliminates sales tax requirements at markets
- Elected officials and faith leaders conference aimed

specifically at creating healthier communities by affecting policy

- Efforts to create a statewide food policy council, driven by Delta Directions
 - An expanded reach of Healthy Congregations as curriculum and teaching materials extend to vacation bible schools, more congregations and to a national conference
 - Interaction between the Community Foundation President, Tom Pittman, and Mayor Chip Johnson of Hernando with First Lady Michelle Obama on two different occasions
 - Hernando becoming the first city in the eight county area to adopt Complete Streets
- At this juncture, the future holds promise. Coalitions, efforts and projects incubated through *Get a Life!* remain sustainable through the Healthy Kids Healthy Communities grant, allowing our work to continue.

"The opportunity to work with 49 other Healthy Kids Healthy Communities throughout the United States is exciting! This four-year grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will provide the tools, resources and opportunities to affect policy and environmental changes and sustain childhood obesity prevention work throughout our region."

—Peggy Linton, Community Development Director for the Community Foundation





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