

NEWS

Obesity fight takes a communityBy **ROBERT LEE LONG**
Community Editor[Print Page](#)

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It not only takes a village to raise a child but it just might take one to keep that village healthy, too.

Rev. Michael O. Minor, pastor of Oak Hill Baptist Church in Hernando, is a foot soldier in the war against obesity.

Minor, whose anti-obesity efforts were chronicled most recently on the front page of the New York Times, and on National Public Radio's Talk of the Nation, is quick to reflect the praise and focus back on organizations like the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi which first helped spread the message about the dangers of obesity in children and adults a half decade ago.

"What the Community Foundation did with the Healthy Congregations grant we received from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was to help us expose the message about obesity to congregations across North Mississippi. Not just to Baptists but Methodists and across the line."

National attention is also being focused this week on the Community Foundation which is profiled in the Aug. 19, 2011 issue of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Innovations Exchange.

The magazine profiles innovative programs directed by the Community Foundation's Tom Pittman, executive director, and Peggy Linton, community development director, with the Foundation's "Get A Life! My Life, My Health, My Choice program."

"Get A Life!" was begun by the Community Foundation in 2005 to reduce childhood obesity in northwest Mississippi.

"It (profile) is a summary of work the Community Foundation has been doing since 2005," Pittman said. "We were pleased that organization judged our efforts worthy of inclusion."

The program continues today through the efforts of Get A Life!'s Regional Health Council, Community Health Councils and Healthy Kids Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The Innovation Profile, "Foundation Supports Rural Stakeholders in Promoting Better Eating and Physical Activity, Leading to Anecdotal Reports of Improved Behaviors and Outcomes," describes the program's development, results, and lessons learned.

For his part, Minor said he has been gratified to observe how eating habits and physical fitness regimes have helped change lives among members of his congregation.

"There are so many people who tell me how much better they feel now that they are not carrying all that weight," Minor said. "Some of the older ones, and even some of the younger ones were headed down the path of being a diabetic, and now they are no longer headed down that path."

Minor was quick to say the anti-obesity efforts have been a community-wide endeavor.

According to Minor, the Community Foundation was instrumental early-on with helping to spread the word about the dangers of obesity.

Pittman and Minor participated in a roundtable discussion on anti-obesity efforts with First lady Michelle Obama at a Jackson school in 2010.

The Community Foundation, through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, set up the Healthy Congregations project to link community leaders with proven programs to fight obesity.

In 2009, Healthy Congregations sponsored its first conference at the DeSoto Civic Center. More than 300 participants learned how to promote gardens, begin walking programs and health ministries, and youth events involving physical fitness.

Due to those efforts and other similar ones, Mississippi no longer ranks No. 1 in adult obesity. West Virginia now claims that dubious honor.

However, Pittman pointed out Mississippi still ranks number one in childhood obesity.

Minor said changing the eating and exercising habits of people was difficult.

"You can't always influence folks directly," Minor said. "You have to work through the community. Through the Community Foundation and Healthy Congregations, a synergy and a groundswell was created throughout North Mississippi. Now lo and behold, we're helping spread that message at a national level."

Minor said CBS "The Early Show" has come calling.

"The Early Show wanted to do an exclusive with me about what we're doing but I told them, it's more than just me. We want to talk about the whole community of Hernando."

Robert Lee Long: rlong@desototimestribune.com or at 662-429-6397, Ext. 252

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