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High school students join Shape Up Panas club

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CORTLANDT

Kimberly Dahl is perhaps the rare teen who shuns fast-food meals. The bad eating habits the 17-year-old says she harbored most of her life are starting to change, thanks to some lessons learned once the school day ends at Walter Panas High School.

"I always knew about ... exercising and eating right," said Dahl, a senior at the school. "But I never did it. I never took action."

What prompted Dahl to step it up is a school club called Shape Up Panas. Its 20 or so members meet twice a week to exercise and hear information about calories, exercise, portion size and healthy eating.

It is run by Cathy Cohen, a nutritionist with Hudson Valley Hospital Center's Wellness Club, and represents one small battle in the fight against childhood obesity.

An estimated 17 percent of those from 12 to 19 nationwide are overweight. Schools have tried to tackle the issue in recent years by banning soft drinks, encouraging exercise and offering healthier cafeteria fare. **The Westchester County Health Department, for instance, has a program called Fit Kids, which provides resource materials to schools to create wellness programs such as a No Junk Food Week.**

Still, misinformation and myths abound.

Carol Bumbolow, the school nurse at Panas, has witnessed weight loss efforts that smack of desperation. She recalled that a few years ago, students eager to drop pounds before the prom would take the now-banned herbal supplement ephedra. The result was racing pulses and panic attacks.

Bumbolow tried to offer a healthier alternative. She even accompanied students to the track for some exercise.

"It becomes very difficult for the school nurse to do that, because if there's an emergency I'm gone," she said.

So Bumbolow was intrigued in 2005 when Joanne Campbell, director of the hospital's Wellness Club in Mohegan Lake, reached out to school representatives in the area to discuss ways to address what Campbell called the "shared burden of obesity."

She thought that perhaps the Wellness Club could run after-school programs funded by parents. The club, which is a gym with holistic services such as a nutritionist and massage therapists, had the experts to offer the schools, Campbell said.

Bumbolow said she wanted to start such a program, but could not ask parents to pay for it. When she learned grant money was available through the Lakeland Education Foundation, she put in a proposal that was accepted.

The Shape Up Club started in the fall. The club meets two days a week for six weeks.

Meetings start with a workout in the Panas weight room, which has enough equipment to rival a private health club.

Then the club members move to the nurse's office, where Cohen finds interesting ways to talk about nutrition. In one exercise, she ladled out spoonfuls of vegetable shortening to demonstrate how much fat was in fast food.

"It was very gross," Dahl said.

During a recent meeting, Cohen told students how much walking is necessary to burn off the calories in certain foods. Eat a large cheeseburger and walk for more than two hours, she said.

"If you are trying to lose weight, you want to try to minimize these high-calorie foods," she said. "Look at how much activity you'd have to do in order to burn them off."

The advice might sound simple, but Cohen said there was an information gap when it came to accurate nutrition information.

"Some kids don't even know what high-calories foods are," Cohen said. "They've heard the term before, but what does that mean?"

Susanne Fenton, a 14-year-old freshman from Cortlandt, said that since joining the club in the fall, she pays much more attention to the calories she consumes and she's lost weight.

Kassandra Kristoferson, an 18-year-old senior from Garrison, said she joined the club to lose weight and get healthy.

"If I don't soon, I'm never going to be able to do it," Kristoferson said.

Not all the students want to diet. Some said they wanted to learn about nutrition and exercise.

Michelle Korn, a 16-year-old junior from Cortlandt, said she was interested in being healthy.

Korn said she learned that she could incorporate small changes, such as taking the stairs more often, into her routine. She is cutting back on diet soda and bringing healthier snacks, such as yogurt and fresh fruit, to school. She said her friends were starting to follow suit.

"I love to see that when I eat healthy, I encourage others to eat healthy," Korn said.
