

ACTIVE Life aims to get people moving

Students work out alongside teachers as part of community challenge

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Music is cranking and weights are clanking inside a warehouse gym with its garage doors rolled wide open on a warm Sunday evening.

Inside, students and teachers from LBJ High School are sweating alongside one another. They're all participating in the Active Life Community Challenge, a program that encourages high school students to move more and eat better — and use social media to encourage others to do the same.

The challenge is spearheaded by Active Life, an Austin-based, nonprofit organization that aims to curb the American trend toward obesity and a sedentary lifestyle.

"We have a culture that's broken," says Baker Harrell, the 33-year-old founder of Active Life. "In this culture, it's much easier and much more normal to be unhealthy."

Harrell grew up overweight in rural Mississippi, where fast food and video games were a way of life for him. But he lost 30 pounds between fifth and sixth grades with the help of his mother, who learned how to cook healthier meals. The family started exercising together, too, and their change influenced neighbors to do the same.

Now he's trying to replicate that change on a much grander scale, sparking a nationwide social movement to create an active American culture.

For the first time in a century, Americans now have a lower life expectancy than their parents, according to study published in *New England Journal of Medicine*. If current trends continue, nearly 90 percent of the U.S. population will be obese by 2030, according to another study by Youfa Wang at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Harrell says technology is partly to blame for our increasingly sluggish lifestyles. Inventions like dishwashers and vacuum cleaners take some of the physical labor out of home life. Kids text, watch TV or use computers when they used to play outside. We drive cars instead of walking or riding bikes.

But technology can be part of the solution to getting people moving again, too, Harrell says.

"Social media is an integral part of how (young people) live. It's literally like oxygen to them," Harrell says. The trick is getting teenagers to text, blog and instant message about healthy topics, to spread a viral message of health.

"We're literally drowning in media messages. How do you cut through the noise? A message coming from a trusted peer, a behavior coming from someone you love is so much more powerful," Harrell says.

Through the Active Life Community Challenge, high school students are matched with local professionals,

forming squads that use FaceBook, Twitter, e-mail and blogs to spread positive messages about health, nutrition and wellness. The students, dubbed "change agents," keep food, exercise and tobacco logs. More importantly, they invite friends and professionals — including their teachers — to join them in activities, like this Sunday evening workout session at Woodward Crossfit, a North Austin gym.

The students earn points based on activities they complete and people they recruit. Top point winners win scholarships.

Cross-generational workouts like this one inspire respect on both sides, says A.T. Turner, LBJ's school improvement counselor and faculty sponsor of the school's Active Life Community Challenge teams.

"It's hard, it's humbling and it feels really good," says Robert Rosenblatt, 42, a counselor at LBJ who was invited to tonight's workout by a student. "We're all on the same team. They're good at stuff we're not and we're good at stuff they're not. Everybody seems a little more human."

LBJ head athletic director Demo Odems, 35, yanks away on a rowing machine, jumps on and off a thigh-high wooden box and hoists a PVC pipe overhead. So does astronomy and health sciences teacher Amanda Chavira, 27.

"It makes it OK to struggle through something. You both achieve together," Chavira says.

"It's always tough. Always really intense," says student squad leader Maria Zuniga, 17, as she huffs and puffs her way through a set. "They push you to keep on going and after you're done with the workout, you feel more energized."

The Active Life Community Challenge is funded in part through a three-year, \$600,000 grant from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, says Active Life program director Liz Guernsey.

The challenge ends with a free festival Saturday at the Burger Center. Each student member of the top three squads will be awarded a \$1,000 scholarship, and the top overall student will earn a \$2,000 scholarship.

Back at the gym, a teacher high-fives a student as the hourlong exercise session draws to a close.

They slump to the floor, exhausted but pleased. And a little bit healthier.

Ways to be active

Wednesday is ActiveLife's "Make the Movement Day," a day-long initiative designed to encourage everyone to create "moments" of physical activity, healthy eating and personal and environmental health. Participants can post what they plan to do to mark the day online at www.makethemovementday.org.

The Active Life Movement Festival is scheduled for 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Toney Burger Center, 3200 Jones Road, with soccer games, nutritional demonstrations, health assessments and performances. For more information about ActiveLife, go to www.activelifemovement.org.

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