Fitness Bound: Michelle Paige Paterson

New York State's first lady is solid in her commitment to fight childhood obesity. She launched an exercise program that's inspiring millions of middle schoolers to take their first steps toward a healthier future.

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Several mornings each week, Michelle Paige Paterson dons a biking helmet then pedals about 10 miles to work. She rides from her Harlem home to her downtown Water Street office at the EmblemHealth Department of Integrated Wellness, where she is the director of integrative wellness. By 9 a.m. she's stationed behind her desk and begins her day.

As the wife of New York Governor David Paterson, she could certainly drive to the office if she wanted. But this is another first lady unafraid to work up a sweat. In fact, she likes it.

"I ride my bike, but I am also a runner," she says. "I started running when I was about 15 years old, and I have been running now for over 33 years. I enjoy some kind of exercise at least three or four times a week."

Through a program she launched in 2007, she's inspiring middle schoolers across the Empire State to develop similar healthy habits. Part of the reason she started the initiative, she says, is to fight the soaring obesity rates among children.

"I've worked in hospitals and talked to doctors and heard how these young people are developing type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension [because of obesity]," says Paterson, herself a mother of two children, Ashley, 21, and Alex, 16. "This is the first generation of kids who might not outlive their parents."

Research confirms Paterson's worst fears. Obesity rates among young people, ages 6 to 19, increased 13 percent from 1980 to 2008.

What caused this crisis, Paterson believes, is a combination of factors. She places a large part of the blame on the federal government for paying farmers to grow corn, a subsidy that began in the '70s and led to a flood of corn-based products, including sweeteners.

"From there, it seemed like corn, which has a lot of sugar in it, was put in processed foods, along with other additives," Paterson says, adding that she remembers when cows ate grass—unlike

today, when they eat feed made from, well, one guess.

Corn dominates our diets too. It is the main ingredient in high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). Food manufacturers love the sweetener because it's cheaper than sugar and also extends a food's consistency, convenience and shelf life.

Though researchers can't say for sure how HFCS affects people's health, Paterson connects children's increased consumption of the sweetener with the ballooning rates of obesity.

Another link, Paterson says, is that families often opt for fast food because it costs less than healthy whole foods such as fresh fruits and veggies, which aren't always available, especially in communities of color.

"These foods are more expensive than processed foods and fast-food [meals]," the first lady says. "I think this returns to all of the corn production."

She also sees a sedentary lifestyle as a culprit. "Children aren't going outside and playing," she says. "I grew up spending hours and hours outside playing in the snow and on the street, having hours of fun with my friends. I think, now, a lot of parents are afraid to let their kids spend a lot of time outside. Our environments aren't as safe as they used to be, and parents feel their kids aren't protected."

In schools, Paterson says, children don't get enough exercise because administrative cutbacks have limited the number of gym classes in the curriculum.

"These things have combined to bring us to this point," she concludes.

But Paterson is not the type to offer only criticism. She offers solutions. As a veteran health services management administrator, she has organized and implemented health programs throughout her career. Paterson responded to the obesity crisis with a plan.

She created a fitness initiative for middle school students called "Healthy Steps to Albany: First Lady's Challenge." The program dares children to exercise more and eat healthier foods.

"I felt that it was really important to reach these kids on their level, not just review some policy changes in school," Paterson says. "I think it's important that children be inspired to take care of their bodies and eat healthy, but it must be fun.

"I wanted to create a program that was fun for kids, inexpensive to implement and no sweat for teachers," she adds.

To engage kids on that level, and with the help of New York State schools, agencies and community organizations, Paterson formulated a program that organized middle school students into competitive class teams. Sixth, seventh and eighth grade students participated in the health

challenge as friendly rivals.

The adolescents were given pedometers (supplied by American International Group) so they could track the number of steps they took daily. At the end of six weeks, those who clocked in the most steps won a healthy meal with the governor and first lady, a visit to an organic farm and a host of other prizes. Paterson's take on the program? "It was a really great success," she says.

Paterson initiated the challenge with about 3,000 students in Harlem from 11 middle schools. When she became the state's first lady, she took the opportunity to expand the program to upstate New York. Students from Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Albany and Yonkers flocked to participate in the challenge. "We went from 3,000 middle school students to 26,000 students," she recalls.

"This March, we will be expanding the program to downstate New York: the five boroughs [of New York City], Long Island and Westchester," Paterson adds. "Now it's up to about 360,000 middle school students who will be invited to participate in this initiative. I'm really excited."

She's also immensely satisfied. She enjoys introducing children to worlds and ideas they might not otherwise experience.

"Many of the kids in Harlem had never been out of their neighborhoods, so going to visit a farm was fascinating for them," she explains. "I remember asking this little 12-year-old girl what was the most interesting thing she learned that day. She told me she didn't realize potato chips came from potatoes. And a little boy said he didn't realize cheese came from milk—he thought it came from a grocery store."

The children's statements reveal a lack of basic information about nutrition—and a need to address the problem.

"We have to educate people," Paterson says. "We have to make a really concerted effort to make sure people are knowledgeable about nutrition and eating healthy."

Minneapolis-based Reed Tuckson, MD, agrees. But Tuckson, who is the executive vice president of United Health Group, takes it one step further. He believes that once people understand which food choices are healthier, then they'll make the right decisions for their best health.

"There is no one putting a gun to our heads telling us to eat unhealthy foods and to eat so much of it," Tuckson says. "These are decisions that we are making and that we have to stop. As parents, we have to make the decision that we aren't going to feed our kids unhealthy foods or allow our children to control what we feed them. We [must not] give them the opportunity to consume all of this fast food that isn't good for them."

Along with the American Public Health Association and Partnership for Prevention, the United Health Group publishes America's Health Rankings, a comprehensive assessment of the nation's

health. The 2009 rankings sounded a particularly ominous warning to African-American communities in states across the nation about the number of largely preventable illnesses triggered by obesity.

“Obesity is a fundamental cause of other diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancers,” Tuckson says. “It is a very serious condition.” If we are going to be successful in fighting for our lives, and the lives of our children, he warns, then we are going to have to make better decisions. And we have to teach our children to make better decisions, too.

How to accomplish this? “We have to appeal to parents and provide them with the resources and support to be successful,” he says. “For example, sometimes parents may think it is difficult to find a safe place for their children to exercise. And if that is the case, then adults are going to have to police the parks or bring in the police department.

“Maybe what we could do is install a basketball court at a church and keep it open Monday through Friday from 3 o’clock until dark and create a safe place for children to be so they’re able to have their childhood back,” Tuckson suggests. “[The point is that] there are solutions we can implement to support families and parents and overcome obstacles.”

But obesity is more than just a health problem. It’s also a financial drain.

“Today, we spend $80 billion on obesity and managing the condition’s medical consequences,” Tuckson says. “In 10 years, if the current trends persist—and there’s no reason to think that they won’t—we will be spending $344 billion a year to manage these obesity-related medical consequences.”

Tuckson likens rising health care costs and an increasingly unhealthier population to two trains about to collide. “Something is going to have to give,” he says. “If we think that something magical is going to happen and someone is going to ride in on a white horse and save us, we are mistaken. This is about our survival.”

Like Tuckson, Paterson stresses the value of both education and personal responsibility as a way to avoid this collision. And, like him, she sees the economic link. It’s especially crucial for young people to educate themselves about nutrition and exercise, she says, because millions of Americans don’t have access to, or simply can’t afford, health care.

But ultimately, she says, “We are responsible for our own health.”

Thanks to Paterson’s efforts, more and more New Yorkers are empowered to take their first steps on the road to a healthier life.

A Heavy-Duty Issue

Obesity rates among African Americans are 51 percent higher than those of the general population. Terrence Fullum, MD, associate professor of surgery at Howard University College of

Medicine in Washington, DC, explains why obesity is a soaring problem in the United States.

There are several reasons why obesity has become an epidemic. The United States is the only country in the world where the lowest socioeconomic class has the highest incidence of obesity (or put more simply, the poorest people are the fattest). If you go to any other country where obesity is an issue—China, India, Australia—as you go down the socioeconomic ladder, obesity disappears. But in the United States, it does just the opposite.

One reason is because—and these are all speculative reasons—in America, during the second half of the 20th century, there was a steady increase of children living in single-parent families. Of course, when you go to any of the diverse, minority populations, the number of single-parent families is higher. It's higher in the African-American population, higher in the Hispanic population. When you add in that American culture is one of living to work—with both parents or the single parent working a lot of hours—it's uncommon for a family to eat dinner together every night.

In the 1950s, mom was a homemaker. That is very rare today. As a result, the fast-food industry stepped in to fill people's need to find another way to get nourishment. Today, the fast-food industry has grown and ranks among the nation's leading employers. They made sure that the food was able to get to you fast, it was hot, and it was relatively inexpensive. Then they did market research and discovered Americans like fat, we like meat, we like sugar, and we like lots of food. When we finish eating, we want to be full. Their market research showed that if people weren't full, they felt their meal was not as good. So they made sure they delivered on all levels.

The problem is that when you create these fast-food restaurants, all the food has to be delivered in bulk. To keep foods from perishing, they created a man-made fat called trans fat. They sprayed it on the food to keep it from perishing. Trans fat is what allows French fries and burgers and other fast foods to last a really long time. And so we ended up eating these very high-calorie, high-fat foods and underestimating the number of calories we put in our bodies.

Then technology boomed and made life very simple. The result? We've become less active. Only about 30 percent of American adults do any kind of exercise. The rest of us don't exercise—at all.

Those are the reasons why the obesity rate is soaring.

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