

Healthier Haskell aims to make campus one of healthiest in country

By Mará Rose Williams

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A few years ago, the Jim Thorpe Fitness Center on the Haskell Indian Nations University campus in Lawrence was a power plant, a stumpy building ignored by most passersby.

Today it's the center of a campuswide health initiative that has students and faculty walking thousands of miles, running marathons, losing weight and eating better.

The program, Healthier Haskell, designed to promote healthier eating habits and encourage exercise, is exactly the sort of effort some national food and health experts said this week they want to see duplicated among American Indian nations across the country.

Thoric Cederstrom, director of food security and food policy for International Relief & Development, which distributes food around the world, discussed a new report on obesity and malnutrition among American Indians at the ninth annual International Food Aid Conference this week in Kansas City.

"We are talking about millions of American Indians struggling with food and health issues," Cederstrom said. "Our native population faces some serious health challenges. A lot of it is due to poverty. The economic impact to this country is huge. The health-care costs are in the billions of dollars for Medicaid and Medicare and welfare. And I don't hear any of the presidential candidates talking about it."

The report, "An Overview of the State of Native American Health," was written by Michele Companion, a professor of sociology at the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs. In it, Companion says solving the growing health crisis among American Indians is vital to the survival of the 561 federally recognized tribes and communities in the U.S. More than 50,000 American Indians live in Missouri and Kansas.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, real per-capita income for American Indians living on reservations is less than \$8,000 a year. One in five reservation residents lives in deep poverty, well below the U.S. poverty line, Companion said.

"They rely on government commodities high in saturated fat, carbohydrates and sodium, and low in protein, fiber and other micronutrients found in fruits and vegetables," she said.

Nicholas Wilder, an American Indian studies student at Haskell and a participant in the university's new health program, isn't surprised to hear about the health crisis facing his people.

"The malnutrition part is not that we don't have stuff to eat, but that we don't eat right," he said.

Cederstrom said decades of poor diet have allowed health problems such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease to reach pandemic proportions in American Indian populations.

“It is like we are killing ourselves with every mouth full of food,” Cederstrom said.

But not on Haskell’s campus, President Linda S. Warner has vowed.

“We want Haskell to become one of the healthiest campuses in the country,” she said.

As part of the Healthier Haskell program started this school year, Warner called on the university food service to change its menu.

“The first thing we did was took soda off the food line and replace it with healthier juices and energy drinks,” she said. The cafeteria salad bar was expanded, and now Warner is looking for strategies to teach students about portion control and how to grow their own vegetables in community gardens.

On any given day, when classes end about 4:30 p.m., a steady stream of students files through the fitness center’s glass doors to work out. Within six months of the program’s launch, nearly every student on campus had voluntarily signed up, said Albert Gipp, who coaches Haskell’s cross country teams and coordinates the wellness program.

“What we work on here is having a balance,” Gipp said. “We work on four areas: physical well-being, our emotional well-being, our intellectual well-being and as Indian people we also must deal with our spiritual well-being.”

Healthier Haskell began with a challenge from Warner for students and faculty to walk enough miles that they could stretch them around the world.

“I thought it would be torture to get people to walk 24,000 miles,” Warner said. “Now we have whole families and even little children out here walking. It’s life-changing.”

And not just for students and faculty. The program has spread to include members of the surrounding community and alumni across the country who are walking in their towns and logging miles for Healthier Haskell. All told, program participants have logged 105,176 miles since August.

Walking isn’t Healthier Haskell’s only activity. It includes monthly and daily activities on fitness, nutrition and wellness, weightlifting, tennis, yoga, swimming and tae kwon do.

Students are boasting big results in weight loss, endurance and eating practices.

Take Charley Lewis, a 23-year-old junior studying environmental science at Haskell.

“Since I have been at Haskell I have tried to run and keep in shape, but it has become a lot easier since Healthier Haskell started. There is always someone to motivate you.”

Lewis, a thickset young man, also is a pow-wow dancer who admitted he used to eat “way too much” fast food.

“I noticed I would get winded dancing,” he said. “I started coming here and running. I cut down on the carbohydrates. I lost about 10 pounds.”

Lewis and his girlfriend — pushing their 4-month-old daughter in a stroller — have participated in all of the monthly Healthier Haskell walking events held on the campus.

Lewis plans to run a half-marathon Sunday in Lawrence. Healthier Haskell is sponsoring him.

Gipp smiles hearing students talk about Healthier Haskell changing their lives. And he says he’s ready to spread the good news about the program to other American Indian colleges.

“We are hoping that they will look at what we are doing, and that they will model what we are doing. We are trying to branch out with Healthier Haskell to reach people all over.”