

How Youth Can Help Further Cherokee's Health Initiative

My family history is heavily interwoven with diabetes. My grandmother (ishi in the Cherokee language) was on mandatory dialysis and even lost the lower half of her left leg before she recently passed due to diabetes complications at age 61. She was in and out of the hospital a lot when her diabetes got worse during the last few years of her life. Seeing this, I made it my priority to make sure I didn't wind up like that, and that's also what my tribe is doing with its health initiative.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, of which I am an enrolled member, has many different methods to further this effort. Programs such as Cherokee Choices and Cherokee Runners are fitness and health programs designed to directly target the diabetes epidemic. Cherokee Choices hosts multiple 5Ks, and has created multiple other smaller programs such as the Cherokee Praying Point Program (children's diabetes prevention), the mentoring program at the Cherokee Central Schools (a mental health and nutrition education program), and the Tribal Employee Wellness Program. Cherokee Runners trains beginner runners and competes in various local 5Ks and other races.

Programs like Cherokee Choices are targeting mental and emotional health as well as physical health to tackle the problem. With events like the Stress and Healing Retreat and stress-relieving yoga, participants are improving their mental and emotional well-being. According to www.mentalhealth.org, those with depression have a 67% increased chance of dying due to heart disease and a 50% increased risk of dying due to cancer, and those with schizophrenia are 2 times likelier to die of heart disease and are also 3 times likelier to die of a respiratory disease. So, by improving mental health, physical health will also improve with proper diet and exercise.

There are many other ways that the tribe could further the effort. According to Robin Bailey-Callahan, RD, MHS, the fitness and nutrition coordinator at Cherokee Choices, in order for the health initiative to work, it's about "taking responsibility for your own actions and health, and making health a priority. Making it a part of culture and share with your friends as normal, everyday life helps to make it a part of the culture." Tribal members also need to learn how to garden and cook healthy and traditional foods. "Embracing the culture will make them proud, confident, and happy which will make them healthier," (Robin Bailey-Callahan, RD, MHS).

There are things that I personally do to help achieve the tribe's goal of a healthier community. I personally exercise and eat healthily every day. My family has a long history of diabetes and heart disease. I strive to be the lost link in the chain, and make it so that I don't develop any chronic diseases. Having this very up-close and personal example has really helped me to stay motivated to stay healthy. I have also personally participated in some of the 5Ks and was a part of the Cherokee Runners group.

Along with fitness programs, the tribe also has nutrition programs. North Carolina Cooperative Extension has multiple programs and classes that promote gardening, agriculture,

farming, and healthy diets. Education about healthy foods and diets is necessary in order for people to start eating healthy. My mother is currently growing a garden so that our family can have healthy and organic food. It's the little things such as this that make the most difference in the long run.

As is, the youth are not excited about or interested in living a healthy lifestyle. Until the youth are excited about being active and eating healthy, everything the tribe and its members are doing are futile. The youth need to be interested in what they're doing if it's going to be done efficiently and effectively. So, the Cherokee Central Schools, Cherokee Youth Center, and other such youth-oriented organizations need to find ways to get the youth interested in living well and healthily.

There are many ways to get the youth interested in healthy and active lifestyles. One idea is to make it so that the kids have something to work toward. The students keep a weekly, everyday log of what they do and eat. At least 60 minutes of some form of exercise is mandatory for at least five days of the week, and a certain amount of healthy foods should also be mandatory. If the students complete five hours of physical exercise at the end of every week, then they get some form of reward. Students get better rewards the more hours they do each week.

The youth need to be taught why they should live healthily and actively. Everybody needs to know what they're working for. Once the schools teach these kids the *real* effects of unhealthy living and diets, only then can they start working towards something better. Beyond this, the youth need to be considering and thinking about how they're living and why. They need to take it upon themselves to seriously think about what they're doing, good and bad.

Once the youth are interested, completing and advancing the health initiative will be smooth sailing. Once the next generation gets accustomed to living a healthy lifestyle, then they can spread their teachings onto the *next* generation, and so on and so forth. Once this generation gets in shape and starts to be healthy, then they can be the missing link in the chain and finally bring this tribe back to when it was healthy. Maybe then the generations following will have fewer troubles.

The youth could also participate in events hosted by programs like Cherokee Choices or Extension. Both of the programs that were afore mentioned have events and smaller programs geared toward the youth. I think that the schools could work alongside these programs and have them teach subjects like P.E., health, and nutrition. This will get the kids used to and interested in the programs, which will result in them supporting and advancing the initiative.

After my grandmother died in October of 2015, I was bound and determined to remain healthy and fit. Diabetes is more than just a disease, it's a killer. It destroys lives, families. And to see these kids, especially very young kids, being diagnosed with diabetes breaks my heart.

I've often thought that this tribe could use some healthiness. I am very grateful for programs like Cherokee Choices for promoting healthiness. I support them whole-heartedly.

In conclusion, the tribe is moving forward to improve the lives of the tribal members and fix one of the biggest problems facing the tribe. With help from tribal members, we can eliminate diabetes and other chronic diseases. Maybe the next generation will be the one that will be free of disease, and be the one who will start anew. That's the goal anyway, and we hope to achieve it one step at a time.

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