



Unwelcome Gains

Kids Learn to Grow Leaner (Without Getting Meaner)

By Patty Kruszewski, Henrico Citizen Managing Editor

If childhood obesity is gaining on us – and by some measures 30 percent of American children are overweight – it isn't the fault of local fitness centers.

Romp n' Roll, American Family Fitness and the YMCA of Richmond are all doing their part to encourage youthful exercise and activity. This month, AFF launched a community service program to help seven area schools – including L. Douglas Wilder and Short Pump middle schools in Henrico – to reduce the incidence of obesity in students and to encourage a life-long interest in fitness and exercise.

The "Fit Families, Fit Schools" program, recognized as the best on-site community program by Club Industry magazine in 2005, provides students, parents and educators with activities and information that enable them to have fun while adopting healthier lifestyles.

AFF invites families to free weekly sessions and provides incentives such as drawings for family membership giveaways at the end of the month. The program also helps with equipment purchases for PE classes and teacher-student workshops.

For the younger set, Romp n' Roll incorporates art and music with the physical activity at its two Henrico locations, where children as young as three months can enjoy exercise, learning and fun with their parents all in one class.

Even infants, points out Romp n' Roll owner Michael Barnett, "can learn at an early age that movement is fun – and also that it's important."

The Romp n' Roll concept was the brainchild of Barnett and his wife, Babz, who moved to Richmond from New York and searched fruitlessly for a one-stop, all-encompassing recreational facility for their children Emma (age two) and Zachary (four).

"Romp n' Roll was just born from the fact that as parents we had this vision of the kind of place we wanted," says Barnett. "You can go a million places and do gymnastics, but you can't exercise your imagination at the same time. Nothing out there combined [art, music and exercise]; and we just kept saying, 'Wouldn't it be great if. . . ?'"

With the help of experts in early childhood education, art, and music, the Barnett's fine-tuned the concept and opened their first gym at the Westpark Shopping Center in 2004.

By the following year, word of mouth (and demand for the gym's popular birthday parties) prompted a second location at Virginia Center. The Barnetts plan to open a Midlothian site soon, and are exploring the idea of franchising the concept.

At-home parents particularly enjoy the program, points out Barnett; not only because they are 'exercising bodies and imaginations' (the Romp n' Roll motto) but because they meet other parents of kids the same age.

And as Romp n' Roll alumni "age up" to programs for pre-teens and teens, they can count on finding help not only at AFF but at area YMCAs.

Teaming with Kraft Foods to provide an after-school curriculum that includes dietary counseling and activity, and with Virginia Commonwealth University to implement a teen fitness program, the Y has produced such success stories as Chance Moore.

A year ago, at 288 pounds, the Deep Run H.S. senior was well on his way to becoming a statistic – an overweight teen at risk for a range of health problems that include Type 2 diabetes and elevated cholesterol and blood pressure.

Referred by his family physician, Moore took advantage of the Y's partnership with VCU, where he was evaluated and placed on a custom-designed program known as TEENS (Teaching Encouragement, Exercise, Nutrition Support).

A profile in the current YMCA newsletter portrays a considerably slimmer Moore, who now weighs 225 and meets only monthly with VCU personnel. With an eye on his goal of 180 pounds, however, he continues to work out at Shady Grove Y three times a week.