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“Running for the Money” Age 6 to 96 Fitness Challenge

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One of the fastest growing problems among all age groups is the rise in obesity and the lack of proper nutrition that is leading to serious health concerns and rising health costs for young and old. A running challenge can produce very positive results for schools that elect to participate in this unique activity. In August 2006, I had the opportunity to submit a grant proposal to the North Carolina Healthy Schools Program. Distance running became the incentive to raise money for area school health programs in northwest North Carolina. Realizing educators and students face many health concerns, I felt this could be a means to raise money and improve health. When the state grant was approved, plans immediately began for the first “Age 6 To 96 Fitness Challenge” at West Wilkes Middle School in Wilkes County, NC. (A major goal for this program is to inform others about the importance of fitness and proper nutrition.)

The plan of action for our first fitness challenge involved selected runners, school and health officials, parents, students, and various community

patrons. To proceed with our fitness challenge, we received funding from local businesses within the community. Immediately we received financial support from the approved grant, as well. As part of the school health fair that was held during the evening hours, the “Age 6 to 96 Fitness Challenge” occurred concurrently. We were fortunate to have an extremely supportive and energetic school principal, Cynthia Altemueller, who provided excellent leadership and organization at this event. Another strong component of our program was a select group of volunteer runners who were determined to “Run for the money.” For each minute our running team continuously ran the designated course within the school facility, community patrons pledged \$40 to support the school health program that enabled the purchase of much needed materials, supplies, and equipment. The first “Age 6 To 96 Fitness Challenge” proved to be a tremendous success!

People ranging in age from five to 92 supported our running team by walking the designated course while we generated \$2,500 to improve the health program at West Wilkes Middle

School. We ran six continuous miles in 55 minutes. The first \$300 was generated from the fitness grant while the remaining contributions were comprised of community pledges. The running time was recorded on the scoreboard in the gymnasium for the benefit of the crowd. Leading by example was our running team that consisted of exercise specialist, Sarah Campbell, Staff Sergeant George Campbell and Staff Sergeant Andrew Sopala, members of the North Carolina National Guard, and me. Our most recent members include Brea Fincannon, Kevin Speaks, Laura Saunders, and Shannon Saunders.

More than 250 people attended the well-publicized evening event that also featured fitness stations, health equipment, and an abundance of health-related information that was provided by local businesses. Participants in the school festivities had an opportunity to win numerous prizes provided by several area businesses. Plans are already underway for next year’s health and fitness fair.

This project has provided excellent publicity for West Wilkes Middle

School and area businesses involved in the challenge. Students and adults have become motivated to develop their own fitness and running skills and lead a healthier lifestyle. Developing these healthy lifestyles can increase work productivity, reduce absenteeism, and improve moral. Medical costs related to obesity could be significantly reduced.

Our next fitness challenge will be held this summer 2007. Our plans are to help finance the construction of a running/walking track for Glade Creek Elementary in Alleghany County, NC. Principal Gary West and staff are excited about this possibility. In addition, other events are planned for this fall.

Our team will definitely “Run for the money!” With this enthusiasm, everyone WINS!

Joe Sinclair, Ed.D., is the Executive Director of the Northwest Regional Educational Service Alliance, (a professional development and training center for educators) in Wilkesboro, NC. He is an avid runner and lives in Statesville, NC. For more information go to www.nwresa.org