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Rye holds the mayo in fight against fat

**By Chris Falcone**

While obesity continues to plague the United States, including many children, organizations and concerned citizens have begun setting their sights on combating this new American epidemic.



The YMCA was the catalyst in getting a coalition of community leaders to go to Washington D.C. for the YMCA "Activate America Pioneering Healthier Communities" National Conference in Sept. 2004 on making changes in our communities for healthier living. The coalition decided that it wanted to focus its attention on schools and communities with an infrastructure from kindergarten to grade twelve. That effort spawned a national YMCA community health initiative formed in 2004 to combat the rampant increase in obesity, declining fitness and chronic disease. The Rye YMCA is one of 48 selected to be involved by forming a coalition to better promote a healthier lifestyle, according to Ed Philipp, Director of Operations for the Rye YMCA, said. "The program Activate America, founded by the YMCA of the USA, is really a grass roots movement and something that the YMCA of Rye has bought into wholeheartedly," Philipp said.

And right here within the city, the Rye YMCA decided to spur on schools to make these important changes by offering \$1,000 grants to local schools within Mamaroneck, Rye Neck, Harrison and the city of Rye, according to Philipp. Eighteen schools became eligible for grant money and there were two rounds of grants awarded, the first in September and the second in December. In total there was \$18,000 to give away. Philipp added that the initiative was undertaken in response to the overall health care crisis in America. Labeled as lifestyle diseases, because often they can be preventable, people today are suffering from high levels of obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure and they are going up, especially obesity among young children. And that whole problem, people are now recognizing, is becoming a crisis.

"Fit Kids" is a program started by the Westchester County Executive and Department of Health aimed at helping children gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to establish healthy eating and physical activity behaviors. The long-term goal is to improve overall health and academic performance. "Schools are at the forefront of educating children about good health and nutrition and encouraging physical activity," Gregg Howells, Executive Director of the Rye YMCA, said. Locally, the Rye Neck Middle School and High School each were awarded a grant as well as the Daniel Warren Elementary School and the F.A. Bellows School. The Midland Elementary School was awarded a grant as well as the Osborn School, which received two grants. "Osborn was the first school to step up to the plate," Philipp said. "Kim Potter called to see how we could work in conjunction with them to create healthier children." The first grant went towards the inception of the recess reward program which started among the 3rd grade School and High School each were awarded a grant as well as the Daniel Warren Elementary School and the F.A. Bellows School. The Midland Elementary School was awarded a grant as well as the Osborn School, which received two grants. "Osborn was the first school to step up to the plate," Philipp said. "Kim Potter called to see how we

could work in conjunction with them to create healthier children.” The first grant went towards the inception of the recess reward program which started among the 3rd grade class in the fall and now has been instituted into the 2nd, 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes also. And it has become such a hit that students have asked their teachers, ahead of time, to take part in the program after the next round of state administered tests. The program revolves around class in the fall and now has been instituted into the 2nd, 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classes also. And it has become such a hit that students have asked their teachers, ahead of time, to take part in the program after the next round of state administered tests. The program revolves around state testing and how stressful those times can be for students and teachers. “The recess reward program is only done after standard testing programs and the reason we picked those is because there’s such a big lead up to it in which teachers spend weeks prepping students,” Kim Potter, Osborn School nurse, said. When the grade level finishes taking one of the tests they are rewarded with an extra hour of recess time outside. Even teachers get a break, and that is where the Rye Y steps in. They become the supervisors of the recess period by setting up touch football games, soccer games and kickball. On top of that, the children are offered apple and orange wedges to snack on which are donated by the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). “State testing takes a lot of class time preparing for it so now instead of using an ice cream party or movie as a reward we have moved the focus to a healthy reward,” she said. “And the Y was awesome in donating services towards that.”



The second grant is being used to foster good nutrition with involvement from the faculty and PTO. There is a new snack program during nutrition month, March, where nurses come up with different foods that are healthy alternatives to the junk foods have become accustomed to eating. The grant money is also being used to have the founder of the Westchester Coalition for Better School Food, a non-profit organization, to come to Osborn to speak in March. This is to help parents get a better understanding of what is offered in the cafeteria. “She is going to walk the cafeteria line and look at all the food out on display to give suggestions on what to do better,” Potter said. “All we have done as a school has only been possible because of the YMCA,” she said. “They’re really creative in promoting this stuff.”

The national organization is using the 2,500 plus YMCA organizations across the country to get the program out. Each one is involved in support of the initiative to varying degrees. “What we’re doing here in Rye is great but this whole thing is much bigger than just us,” Philipp said. The local Y is also part of Pioneering Healthier Communities, a project that engages key community stakeholders to develop strategies aimed at increasing awareness of healthy living in local communities. “We’re thrilled at the participation with the YMCA; they have been so cooperative and so positive,” Clarita Zeppie, principal at the Osborn School, said. “They have been so wonderful in helping to push these initiatives were very grateful that they have worked with us in doing this.” What the Osborn school is also initiating of importance is trying to avoid using food as a punishment or reward. The philosophy, according to Potter, had always been ‘If you do your work you get a bag of skittles.’ And with 600 students it can be easy to fall into that

cost-effective trap. Yet, when dealing with a child's health cutting corners shouldn't be in the equation. "We're trying to dismiss the myth that we can't be having fun unless we're eating junk food," she explains. "Ultimately, can we change the mindset altogether into wanting to take a test if the reward was that good." Potter attends Activate America meetings, which are every other month as well as monthly meetings of the Wellness Committee, a very active organization within the school, which is made up of 14 parents and 5 faculty members. So it is safe to say that the cause is out there, the campaign is being spread and at one small school the fight to achieve a better life, a healthier life is one test Osborn is working hard to pass.

