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## HEALTH & BEAUTY FEATURES

# Kids Get Help with Battling the Bulge

The Mystics and Inova Partner on Fighting Obesity

By Amanda H. Millward

Twenty percent of Northern Virginia children are obese, says Dr. Diane Heletjaris of the Virginia Department of Health.

Dr. Sheila C. Johnson, vice-president of Monumental Sports & Entertainment and president and managing partner of the Washington Mystics, was concerned about childhood obesity when she saw some of the girls that would take part in the Mystics community team day. Now, she has come up with a plan of action to help teach girls the importance of exercise and nutrition. Johnson recently announced that her team is partnering with Inova Health Systems to help fight childhood obesity, bring awareness to women's health issues and address preventative care issues.

"The Mystics are going to go out in the community and giving talks on nutrition and exercise," says Johnson, who is calling the partnership with Inova one of the proudest moments of her career.

Similarly, Rod Williams, vice president of community affairs for Inova, is excited about the work the partnership will bring—a childhood obesity summit and symposium to schoolday games.

"It's not a partnership that will live on the shelf. It is a partnership that will live in the community, by the community and with the community," he says.

Moving forward with their efforts, on April 29, Inova Healthcare gathered teachers, local politicians, doctors and other healthcare professionals to see if Virginia could find an answer to this growing problem, with Johnson being the keynote speaker.

"For the first time ever, the next generation will live less than what we have been seeing. We have to do something. We have to take action," said Senator George Barker (D-Alexandria), who plans to reintroduce a bill that will require Virginia students to get more physical education. The same bill was vetoed by Governor McDonnell in the past.

The conference, held at George Mason University, had experts from a number of community aspects including governments, faiths, businesses, non-profits, schools, family and health services.

"I was really pleased that not just the educational system—not just one part of our lives—is taking part in [the fight against] childhood obesity," says Jordan Greene, a physical education teacher at Springwoods Elementary School in Woodbridge.

Greene was on the expert panel sharing the work that he has done at Springwoods. He has helped with the 95210 initiative, which is to help kids understand to get nine hours of sleep every night, five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, two hours of screen time (including television, video games, and computer time), one hour of physical activity every day and zero sugary drinks. Greene also helped start a family activity night where students and their families can come and learn about the initiative and see local vendors that support a healthy lifestyle. He also made sure the school is providing bottled water so the students had access to drinking water.



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Also speaking on the expert panel was Reverend Henry Brinton from Fairfax Presbyterian Church, Bill Germanokos from "The Biggest Loser" and Dr. Khalid R Randolph from Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington.

With all that the Northern Virginia area has to offer for children, the Virginia Department of Health still found 20 percent (about 1 in every 5 child) to be obese. This is a higher rate than Central Virginia's 18 percent of children who are obese but still lower than the 28 percent of obese children in Southwest Virginia.

Helentjaris spoke on what parents can do, at and away from home, to reduce childhood obesity. "Parents can limit screen time, know what's happening in daycare, providing fruits and vegetables, serve milk or water, exercise portion control and get the TV out of the kid's bedroom."

Catherine Keightley, executive director of Girls on the Run of Northern Virginia, a nonprofit with a mission of educating girls in grades 3-8 on healthy living and self respect through running, was encouraged by the information received at the conference. "The material presented was on target and was presented in an insightful way. They shared important statistics about obesity that we can use to help our volunteers understand the importance of this issue."





But many are aware that information alone will not stop the bulging waistlines our children are dealing with.

"Whether it's issues from environmental to childhood obesity, we can't solve the problems with just one sector alone. We need the entire community involved," says Dr. Kevin Vigilante, partner of Booz Allen Hamilton and moderator of the event.

"As a community leader, this is an issue that is on a lot of people's minds," says Purcellville Mayor and Community Affairs executive for Inova Fairfax Hospital, Bob Lazaro. "[This conference] reinforces the importance of the issue and we should continue to support those things that promote general wellness such as farmers markets and running races and encouraging personal wellness behaviors."

Lazaro took action to help fight obesity by organizing a farmers' market on town hall property and holding a Loudoun Grown Expo with over 1,000 people in attendance. He is also trying to connect neighborhoods with sidewalks for citizens to get exercise. However, Lazaro believes that there is also a need for personal responsibility on the issue. "Parents should encourage their children to participate in sports instead of exercising their thumbs playing Nintendo," he says. "People need to understand there isn't a government program for everything, and [that they] need to take some personal responsibility with their children's behavior." Lazaro suggest parents getting involved as volunteer coaches to be role models for their children.

Furthering the partnership that brought about the conference, Inova Health Systems and Washington Mystics, on May 26, will hold a school-day game where local area kids can learn about health and wellness while playing basketball with the Washington Mystics.

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