

Local**CARLISLE**

Program pairs special education, physical fitness

By [Erica Dolson, Sentinel Reporter](#), December 16, 2009

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Nikola "Nicky" Kendall can be found at the Carlisle YMCA two nights a week.

During his one-hour session with trainer Bre Metoxen, Kendall lifts weights, uses the treadmill for 20 minutes and the exercise bike for 10, barely breaking a sweat.

"I learned to lose weight with Bre a lot," Kendall, an 18-year-old student at Carlisle High School, said. "I feel really good now."

That wasn't always the case.

For two years, Kendall has worked with Metoxen as part of the LifeFit fitness and nutrition program through United Cerebral Palsy of Central Pennsylvania. The program's mission is to teach healthy lifestyle habits, including exercise and nutrition, to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a population at greater risk for obesity and the chronic health problems associated with it, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 33 percent of American adults are obese.

That percentage is even higher among adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Metoxen said.

First program

This program is one of the first pairings of physical fitness and special education, Metoxen added.

"It's a problem that hasn't been looked at, and these people are more likely to be overweight," Metoxen said. "We've worked so hard to get them (people with special needs) their rights, we've lost focus on what's healthy for them."

Nicky Kendall's parents looked into LifeFit as his weight, and pants size, began to increase steadily, said his mother, Gabriela Kendall.

"Our biggest concerns were the future," she said, "his health in the future."

Since the summer months, Nicky Kendall has lost 21 pounds. Each month, Metoxen tests his BMI, with a goal of keeping it below 25 percent, she said.

"Our main goal is to keep them independent," Metoxen said. "We don't want them to just come and exercise, we want them to understand why."

As participants walk on the treadmill, LifeFit's staff, all exercise physiologists with four-year degrees, explain that the exercise burns calories and keeps their hearts strong, Metoxen said. As they lift weights, the staff explains that it builds muscles to help them stay independent, Metoxen said.

"What's our big muscle in our bodies that we have to work?" Metoxen asked as Kendall pedaled at level four on the stationary bike.

"My arms," he replied. (His favorite muscle to build - for the ladies, Metoxen explained.)

"Your heart," Metoxen answered.

Three years old

The LifeFit program began three years ago with a grant from the Carlisle Area Health and Wellness Foundation. The program has worked in collaboration with the Carlisle YMCA, which has provided the facility for the participants and trainers.

The one-on-one program at the Carlisle YMCA sees 38 participants, Metoxen said.

In April 2008, LifeFit expanded into eight adult day programs in Dauphin, Cumberland and Perry counties, offering classes to a total of 81 participants.

UCP Central PA and Temple University have also received a grant from the National Institutes of Health to allow researchers from Temple to discuss the best ways to administer fitness and nutrition programming for individuals with disabilities and their caregivers.

In January, the grant from the Carlisle Area Health and Wellness Foundation will expire, and LifeFit is currently looking to transfer its participants to other funding, Metoxen said. About 19 people have already transferred to waiver funding offered by the MH/MR offices of Cumberland, Perry and Dauphin counties.

Results

An analysis of the program from September 2009 showed the average weight of participants decreased in six months to 186 pounds from 193. The weight loss was maintained through subsequent 12- and 18-month measurements.

Waist measurements of participants decreased about 3 inches, and hip measurements decreased approximately 2 inches. Diastolic blood pressure decreased to average levels of 76 from 82.

And since Nicky Kendall began the program, he's seen his own successful results.

"Well, he refuses to eat French fries, that's the big one," his father, Mark Kendall said. "We're making good solid choices."

"Once he develops a habit, he sticks to it. That's what we're doing, we're developing habits for the future," Gabriela Kendall said. "And I don't have to nag him. He's doing this himself."

Nicky Kendall has replaced the pizza and hot dogs from his old diet with choices like grilled chicken sandwiches and mahi mahi, he said. And he has also been buying pants in smaller sizes, he said.

"He's very proud of himself," Gabriela Kendall said.

"And them, too," Nicky Kendall said, gesturing toward his parents.

"Yes," Mark Kendall said. "I'm proud of you, too."

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