



Health

PREVENTION, TREATMENT & CURE

HEALTHY STEPS TO ALBANY

By Gioya McRae

Harlem middle school students challenged to walk for health



Children today have a lower life expectancy than their parents, largely due to the rise in obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. The

numbers and statistics are compelling. Seventeen percent of children aged two to nineteen in the United States are classified as obese. In Harlem, the numbers are as high as 28 percent. Nothing, however, is as frightening as knowing that our children may not live as long as we do!

The "Healthy Steps to Albany" initiative is the brainchild of Michelle Paige Paterson, director of Integrative Wellness at HIP Health Plan of New York. Ms. Paterson has partnered with the Metro-Manhattan Chapter of The Links to create new ways to increase physical activity and nutrition for all middle-school children within their community.

This pilot program, which they aim to replicate around the state of New York, will invite middle school students from Harlem to use pedometers donated by AIG to walk the number of miles (140-plus) that it would take to travel to Albany. The class from each middle school that completes the steps the first, will be invited to Albany for a healthy meal and a visit with Governor Eliot Spitzer and Lt. Governor David Paterson, Michelle Paterson's husband of 15 years. The children will also visit an organic/biodynamic farm in upstate New York to experience first hand how food is grown.

The "Healthy Steps to Albany" initiative will include an innovative curriculum to teach nutrition and exercise, and to conduct an in-depth examination of the fast food "message"; to provide teacher training and parent education; and to give incentives to engage and sustain the interest of participants in the program

Ms. Paterson explained, "By making exercise 'cool' for kids, 'no sweat' for teachers, and inexpensive to carry out, we are aiming to fuse the spirit of imagination with the feeling of power to challenge and inspire our Harlem children to embrace new ways to be healthy."

A sampling of sponsor participation includes:

- Hip hop star Grandmaster Mele-Mel's rap song "Activity not Passivity" will be featured. It is a fun, and exciting exercise DVD for children to develop a connection between body-mind fitness.
- The Green Magazine is sponsoring an essay contest for the students and will publish the winners, as well as, give substantial cash awards.
- The New York Mets will honor the Healthy Steps winners on the field at Shea Stadium.
- Pfizer has donated more than 200 computers as prizes.
- Hawthorne Valley Farm, a biodynamic farm in Harlemville, NY, is offering the students hands-on experiences in what it means to be stewards of the land.

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Michelle Paige Paterson

- Seton Hall University will institute an evidence-based evaluation of the Healthy Steps initiative to confirm if the program influences behaviors and attitudes toward healthy lifestyles.

Other sponsors of the initiative include Verizon, HIP Health Plan of New York, Dr. Oz's not-for-profit (HealthCorps), Burson-Marsteller, BET Entertainment TV, CUNY College and the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

The Links, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization consisting of 12,000 professional women of color linked by 273 chapters around the globe. The Metro-Manhattan Chapter of The Links is comprised of prominent women from the New York area who have served the community of Harlem for the last 17 years.

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Michelle Paterson's own public policy interests have been focused on survivors of domestic violence. She spent three years as an on-call volunteer at the St Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital, counseling domestic violence victims and educating women on how the hospital and state government could best help them.

The kick-off for the "Healthy Steps to Albany" contest is expected to take place on March 18, 2008 at a press conference at City College of New York. Attending will be elected officials from the community and sponsors for the initiative, as well as Lt. Governor Paterson and the First Lady of New York State, Silda Wall Spitzer. So step up and support this worthy event!

Interested parties may call the Healthy Steps to Albany Hotline at 212-283-2652 or email Michelle Paige Paterson at mpaige@urbantech.org.

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