

Norm Cates'
CLUB INSIDERTM
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Linda Fondren, Shape Up Sisters Founder, Winning the Vicksburg Weight Battle

Linda Fondren

Instituting The Local Shape Up

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Linda Fondren

Instituting The Local Shape Up

By: Justin Cates

From time to time, adversity can strike and change one's life. Sometimes, that change is for the better, if the difficulty of that time motivates someone to achieve better things. And sometimes, that change can be much worse if the difficulty prevents the ability to move on. Arguably, one's ultimate test in life is how true adversity is handled when it strikes. Several years ago, Linda Fondren met adversity when her sister, Mary Washington, passed away from cancer. Ultimately, obesity was a contributing factor. Maybe it wasn't the deciding factor, but it greatly affected the life lived by Mary. Her final words to Linda were, "I wish I had lived my life more for myself," and as you will see, those words and the difficulty of that time have motivated Linda to fight for the betterment of the lives of women in her community: Vicksburg, Mississippi. In her fight, she is truly helping those local women live their lives more for themselves.

In order to understand the change Linda has affected in others' lives, there are actually two stories to be told. They are both great in their own right and could be shared separately. Together, though, the full story of what she has achieved in her community can lend lessons to other club owners and operators wanting to make a true difference in their

communities. At the very least, it can certainly grant new motivation in continuing the mission of helping others in the health and fitness clubs of our industry.

The first part of Linda's story is that of her women's-only health and fitness club, Shape Up Sisters. It's opening only six months after the death of her sister is a testament to the love she had for her sister and the commitment to the goal of helping make other women's lives better. The second part of the story is that of a weight loss challenge called Shape Up Vicksburg that she proposed to her community. Though getting results by reaching out to women in the community through Shape Up Sisters, she wanted to extend that reach even more. The goal of the challenge was for the community to lose 17,000 pounds in 17 weeks. That may not sound like much for a town of 55,000 people, but as Linda will share, it's all about baby steps that result in a long-term commitment to change. A healthy life is not a sprint; it is a marathon.

The story of Linda Fondren has caught the eye of both local and national press, from the Vicksburg Post to CNN, ABC, CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, CNN, Essence Magazine and Glamour Magazine. Though by no means her original goal, she is now a Finalist for CNN's HERO of the Year Award. Originally nominated out of a field of 10,000, she is now vying

for the award in a field of only ten, another amazing accomplishment. It is the cherry on top of what she has already accomplished in such a short time, and it has brought national attention to the successful ways in which she is battling the national epidemic of obesity at the local level. Only within our local communities can obesity be beaten. In the end, it will not be top-down change that kills the beast, but instead, from the bottom-up with club owners and operators whose goal it is to help others live better, more healthy, lives.

We hope you find the story of Linda Fondren inspiring, and even more, hope you find the takeaways suitable for use in your own facilities and communities where appropriate. With that, we are pleased to present the story of Linda Fondren as she institutes the "Local Shape Up."

An Interview With Linda Fondren

CLUB INSIDER (C.I.) - Please tell our readers about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you go



Linda Fondren, Founder of Shape Up Sisters

to school? Are you married? If so, do you have any children?

born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi and went to school

Linda Fondren (LF) - I was

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...Linda Fondren

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here. I have been married to my husband, Jim, for 26 years, soon to be 27 years in December. We have one daughter named Christina.

Shape Up Sisters

C.I. - When did you open your women's-only health club, Shape Up Sisters, and what was the inspiration for doing so?

LF - I opened Shape Up Sisters in June of 2006 to help women like my sister, who passed away when she was just 54. She was less than five feet tall and weighed about 260 pounds. Of course, cancer took her life, but obesity robbed her of really living that life. Her last words to me were, 'Linda, I wish I had lived my life more for myself.' Six months later, I opened up Shape Up Sisters for women like her. She would not go to a traditional gym because she was too big. She was embarrassed, had no confidence and a lack of motivation to exercise.

C.I. - Please tell us about your facility; size in square feet, number of members, differentiating features, etc.

LF - It's a ladies' only facility, especially for those who would not feel comfortable in a traditional gym. One of the things I wanted to do was give it a pleasant atmosphere. It is done in soothing colors of pink, light pink and burgundy. We have a juice bar by Performance Food Group, free lockers, free towel service and of course free fitness classes. More than anything else, I wanted an environment for women looking to lose weight and gain more self confidence. And, I wanted a way for them to pamper themselves, so we have massages, fitness and

nutritional workshops and even bra sizing. All of these amenities help them attain their fitness goals. The square footage is a little over 5,000 square feet, and we have about 600 members.

One of the things I think that separates us a little is what's called, 'We Work Out With You.' We have seven personal trainers, including myself, and fitness motivators, so when women come into the gym, they do not have to work out by themselves. A fitness motivator will work out with them. Most women who come into the gym do not know what they're doing, or even if they are making the best use of their time. Women work one, sometimes two jobs, especially here. So, their time is valuable, and they need to make the best use of it. No matter how many times they come into the gym, we show them how to work the machines and how to properly get their heart rates up because, if you're not doing that, you are wasting your time. I really emphasize that. You really have to get your heart rate up. And, one of the other things that women like is strength training. They want to tone up. We also have Zumba. That's a fun fun class, if you know Zumba. We also offer Group Active, Group Centergy and Group Grove by Body Training Systems. We have yoga, weights and striptease on occasion. Women love that one (striptease). They also love Step, Kickboxing and Pilates. Yoga, though, is my favorite. I teach it. When women come to my class, they don't realize they're not flexible. They say, 'Wow, I can't even do that.' And, their balance is off, so that's a great class for them. We have a lot of great classes.

C.I. - On Saturdays, you do something that is simply great...

You open the doors of your club to the community for free so anyone who wants to work out can. Please tell us about this.

LF - The free Saturdays started from the Shape Up Vicksburg challenge. At that time, I went to all the gyms in the community, and I asked them to let the community work out one day a week for free during the 17-week weight loss challenge. They all agreed, which was great, and they also served as weigh-in stations. The challenge was only for 17 weeks, but I continued with the free Saturdays because it was a way to reach and help many more women. With today's bad economy, many simply cannot afford a gym membership. It can help with the hard times. Women come to the gym on Saturdays, and they tell me they feel like someone cares. They tell me it makes them want to do better for themselves.

C.I. - Another great thing you do is personally-lead nutrition classes for your members and then join them on 'field trips' to the grocery store. Please tell us about this.

LF - Shape Up Vicksburg again. I know that nutrition and physical activity go hand-in-hand. I had been looking for something to offer members of the community and at my gym. I had been to seminars, and I came across a program called BodyWorks (www.womenshealth.gov/bodyworks). It was developed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, and it's designed to help parents improve their family's eating and activity habits. It's such a great thing because what I have always wanted to do with my members is develop them into role models so that they can help someone else. It became a perfect tool to educate the women and the community about nutrition. The program is free to members of my gym and to the community. We give them hands-on tools. I also have a registered dietician that goes with us to the store. What a difference it makes. Women are just elated. They didn't know the difference between a serving size and a portion size, how many calories to take in or how to read a food label.

There is a lot of information out there and trying to understand it all is hard. You have to learn in simple terms. Being in a class with other people with the same problem really helps them with their own problems. So,



Shape Up Sisters Strength Area

that's the nutrition program. It's a perfect opportunity, and I just love this program. We even cook. We have someone that comes in for cooking demonstrations. It's the simple things. For your family, instead of the stuff they eat, we show them simple solutions. It's hands-on, which makes it much more memorable. Right now, I have a waiting list for these classes, and I've just taken this to the school districts. It's a community effort.

C.I. - In a March, 2008 article by the Vicksburg Post, you commented, 'we work out with you; we educate you on exercise and nutrition and, most importantly, we make it fun.' We have talked about the first two, but please elaborate on the final one, 'we make it fun.'

LF - When I talk to most people, exercise is 'bad word.' They see it as another form of stress, which is really really bad because it's supposed to be something you

(See *Linda Fondren Page 12*)

Comments From Member, Evelyn Weaver

Since my second child was born, I have struggled for over 20 years with my weight. I tried everything, all the different diets because it worked on the commercials, but I was always disappointed with the results. I have always tried to eat right, and I have always exercised, but the results were always the same; weight off for a little while and then back on. At one time, I had gotten up to 160 pounds after a surgery, and the weight would not come off. Imagine how that felt. I always stayed down on myself. I had no self confidence. I never thought I was pretty enough. I would not go out because I thought people would be staring at me and saying, "Look at her." I would watch what I ate in restaurants, so people would not think I was a pig. I never felt sexy enough. I was never really happy with myself.

I joined Shape up Sisters, and at the end of February 2009, after many days in the gym and a boot camp, I had lost 15 pounds and 11 1/2 inches. I struggle every day with my weight because it is an ongoing process, but every day, it seems to get a little easier. I wanted to participate in Shape Up Vicksburg because I am proof of what sticking with a program and having people like Linda and her staff motivating you all the time can do. I am 137 pounds, and still in my size 8, instead of my size 12 one year later.

I have the support of my family and the staff of Shape Up Sisters always encouraging me. With all that, how can a person not stay motivated? If one woman can learn from my experience, then she too will know what it is like to feel good about themselves.



Evelyn Weaver



Step Class at Shape Up Sisters

...Linda Fondren

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don't have to think about. So, we make it a social environment. When you come in from your day of work, you are able to come in, have a conversation and stay around. We let the members talk. We also have great uplifting music, with everything from Hip-Hop to Country to Motown. The classes are fun. My instructors are fun. We are not a gym where 'you have to do this' and everything is monotone. We are absolutely excited and overly passionate. My staff knows that it's about friendliness and fun. The women are coming in from a stressful day, so we make them laugh. We do silly things, and we have them do silly things when they are working out. They laugh; they just love to laugh. So, we make it fun. Many people think exercise is boring, so when you have them doing things like Zumba or the Merengue and the Cha Cha Cha, they really get into it. They've seen *Dancing With The Stars*, and they all want to do that. We offer a lot of encouragement, too, so they will participate in activities. Take balance, which I teach. The women are trying to balance, and then, they are kind of tipping over and catching their balance. They are laughing, but they are determined to get there.

Shape Up Vicksburg

C.I. - When and how did your mission to 'Shape Up Vicksburg' begin? What were the results?

LF - It came about from observing the members of Shape Up Sisters. As part of membership, we analyze each member's body composition. We get their weight, BMI, % of fat, fat free muscle, etc. This is a computer print out, so

they get a copy. We keep a copy, and once a month, they come in and do the same thing to know where they are. In analyzing this, I realized that many women did not know they were obese. Part of the problem is that being overweight is so common place that it is 'normal.' When you are in an environment where everyone looks like you, you think that it's normal. But, when you actually have measurements taken, you find out that you are actually overweight or obese. This is shocking to women. Women start expressing this when working out. 'You know, it would nice if I could get the help of my husband,' or, 'You know, my child is nine years old, and she is three times a normal weight.'

So, I knew I needed to reach more people in the community. Last October, I challenged the community to lose 17,000 pounds. They had to do that within 17 weeks, but what it was really about was taking baby steps. I only asked them to lose half a pound. Well, first, stop the weight gain, then lose only half a pound. They did well. The community lost 15,000 pounds, and I was so happy with that. When I started it and announced it on radio, television and went around challenging the community, my telephone was ringing off the hook. People in the community were asking how to sign up. It was unbelievable. They wanted to be better, but they just did not have the tools or opportunities to do it. Then, people started losing weight and invited friends to join them. That's one of the things I said, 'Get a friend.' They are the extra motivation to keep you going. People got committed, which is exactly what I wanted to see happen. I have many stories of

people who have dropped weight. Some may have only dropped five pounds, but as you know, some weight dropped is better than none.

Shape Up Vicksburg was really about encouraging and challenging a community to get better. When we come together and help each other, I think we can be successful. We proved it. We lost 15,000 pounds, and this whole community came together. The State of Mississippi, over and over, has been the most obese state. We have held that title for so long. Another thing is we are number one in high blood pressure, diabetes and a lack of physical activity. We are very sedentary here. Nowadays, it's reinforced with the growing rate of obesity in children. That is why communities must come together and help one another. It can be done when we all work together.

C.I. - Please tell us about the different components you and local businesses provide to participants to help them achieve their goals.



Linda Fondren Leads Shape Up Vicksburg Warmup

LF - I went to a number of places. I went to elected officials, churches, restaurants, civic groups, businesses like Wal-Mart and Kroger, our local hospital and medical centers, and the casinos and asked all of them to be partners. They all jumped at the opportunity. This was a community effort. No one put money into it. They put their time, their effort, their employees, and

everybody worked together to make it happen. This was the way it had to happen. It had to be the community coming together to do it.

The 17,000-pound weight loss challenge actually ended in February, but I extended it to reach a lot more people. We added a walking club and more nutritional education. It is more than a weight loss challenge.

(See **Linda Fondren Page 14**)

Comments From Trainer, Trophia Robinson

CLUB INSIDER (C.I.) - I'm told you were a member of Shape Up Sisters before becoming a trainer. Please tell us about the results you saw in yourself as a member and why you decided to become a trainer.

Trophia Robinson (TR) - I was actually not a member of Shape Up Sisters at first. I decided to train on my own before becoming part of the Shape Up Sisters family. With the help of a physical therapist and a registered nurse at a local center in Port Gibson, I was taught about proper nutrition and how to exercise effectively. I dedicated myself to working out five days per week for at least an hour per day. Within a month, the scale slowly began to drop. I finally became the person that I wanted to be inside and out. Within months, I decided that I, too, could help people who are struggling with their weight by telling them my story and my struggles. This is when I became part of the Shape Up Sisters family as a part-time aerobics instructor. I wanted people to know that, with hard work and dedication, they could become the person they want to be. This is my sole reason for becoming a fitness instructor and trainer.



Trophia Robinson

C.I. - Having been in the 'member's shoes,' how does being able to relate to them in terms of losing weight and becoming fit for the long-term help you in training them?

TR - It has really helped me be able to relate to people. When someone says, 'I can't do it,' I always tell them about how I used to be, and then, they see me in a whole new light. I am more compassionate and caring toward obese people because I know what it feels like. I know how it feels to be viewed as fat or overweight! It has truly helped me become the best trainer I can be.

C.I. - What is the greatest challenge of being a personal trainer?

TR - My greatest challenge is getting people to see that losing weight has to be a lifestyle change! Most people just want this overnight fix, but it is heartbreaking to see them give up and slip back into old habits of overeating and not working out. It is really discouraging to see them step on the scale after having worked so hard to see either one pound or no weight loss at all. Then, I have to go through the counseling aspect and let them know that weight loss takes time. You have to incorporate healthy meal plans and exercise to achieve the desired weight loss.

C.I. - Conversely, what is greatest reward for being a personal trainer?

TR - My greatest reward is to see the smiles on their faces when they do the unthinkable, whether it be completing an entire boot camp, losing weight, increasing their endurance or just achieving the overall fitness results that I promised them they would achieve.



Linda Fondren Leads a Walk Through Vicksburg

...Linda Fondren

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What I want people to take away from this is that this is a life transformation challenge. I continue to seek the help of our hospitals. They still come out and do free health screenings. That is what is so important. People need information about where they are. They do not know their cholesterol or their blood pressure is that high. Even our Mayor, Police Department, the Sherriff and Fire Department are here. They are at the walks. This is good because the community gets to see that they are supported by elected officials and community leaders. Also, our walks are to places the participants didn't know existed. On our last walk, we walked on brick-lined streets, went by beautiful homes and even our historic courthouse. We have walked along side and over our Mississippi River, which people just drive by. People learn to love their community and to love themselves. It just gives you that 'feel-good' so you want to do better. That's the aim of what we are doing now. It's a life transformation

challenge, and we are giving them the tools and opportunities to make positive changes.

C.I. - You were recently one of 10,000 people nominated for CNN's HERO Award, and now, you're one of ten people who are the finalists for the Award that will be given in Hollywood on Thanksgiving Day. What does this mean to you?

LF - Well, I feel someone is paying attention, and I am extremely honored. This challenge got the attention of the local press, national press and international press, but I also think that we are all heroes when we are responsible, I really do. We are heroes when we serve as role models to help each other. I just think that's so important. I also think it's important to be a community standing together, because these are tough times.

C.I. - Obesity is a national epidemic, but it can only truly be fought at the local level with 'battlefield generals' such as yourself. What message or advice would you share with other club owners who are fighting to save their communities from the

obesity epidemic so that they may see success in that battle?

LF - Gyms really need to focus on the 80% of the population who don't go to one. We need to focus more on education about exercise, and I also think there needs to be more weight loss programs focused on prevention. We need to make exercise a permanent solution. We need to market that. You don't just start it and stop it. We need to focus on talking about ways to help make exercise permanent. We also need to get more involved in communities. We need to reach out to schools, businesses, the medical community, elected officials, and we need to talk about how gyms can help fight obesity. There are communities with no safe places for children to play or adults to walk, jog or ride a bike. A gym can provide a safe environment and offer all the programs I already mentioned. I think that gyms should focus more on the communities because they are part of these communities.

C.I. - Your club is an IHRSA Member Club. How long ago did you join IHRSA and why? How has your membership in IHRSA

helped you as a club owner?

LF - I joined IHRSA back in 2007. I was new to the fitness world and wanted to educate myself. I went to fitness seminars, but IHRSA had information, tools, ideas and strategies. That's what I needed to grow. I even participated in *I Lost It At The Club* twice. That was so much fun for our gym. I had gym bags and t-shirts made, and it was so great. I feel like IHRSA is a personal lobbyist for me. It's researching and analyzing the tools that I need to make my gym a success. So, I love IHRSA. I go on their website all the time looking for new ideas.

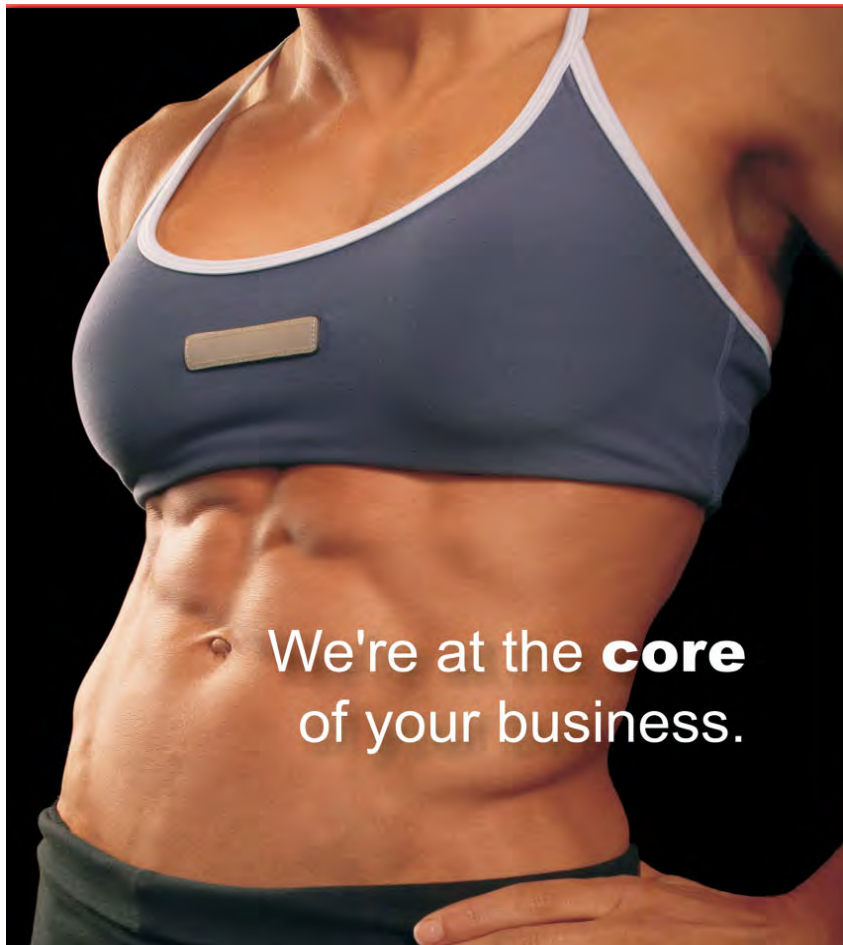
C.I. - Looking forward to the future, what would you like to accomplish?

LF - I'd like to have more programs out there that educate communities about exercise. I think exercise is really the key. I would like to have more gyms in the community giving back and showing how they can make a difference. With Shape Up Vicksburg, I want a healthy future based on exercise as prevention. I think exercise is such an important component.

• • •

We hope you found the story of Linda Fondren and what she is doing in Vicksburg, Mississippi to combat obesity inspiring. We also hope it provided a plethora of ideas you can employ in your own clubs. A special thanks to Linda for her time, making this article possible, as well as to others who contributed. To vote for Linda to receive CNN's HERO Of The Year Award, go to www.cnnheroes.com.

(Justin Cates is the President and Assistant Publisher of CLUB INSIDER and grew up in the health, racquet and sports club industry. Justin was born into a club business family in 1985 and from the age of eight, he spent his non-school and sports hours in a home which doubled as CLUB INSIDER Headquarters. He has lived and breathed this industry for 25 years, since his own day one. Now, he is an integral part of the "Story" of Norm Cates and CLUB INSIDER. Justin may be reached by phone at (770) 595 - 6086 or email at Justin@clubinsideronline.com)



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