



The Weight Loss Crusade

Sometimes it takes an individual to raise a village.

Client: The City of Vicksburg
Personal Trainer: Linda Fondren, owner, Shape Up Sisters
Location: Vicksburg, Mississippi

Cold, Hard Facts. According to a recent report, Mississippi is the “fattest” state with 34.4% of its citizens considered overweight or obese (<http://healthyAmericans.org/report/88>). This does not sit well with Linda Fondren, owner of Shape Up Sisters. “Obesity is normal in our environment,” Fondren says. “[Mississippi is] ranked #1 in lack of physical activity, and Vicksburg is right along that path and is not immune to that fact.”

Known as the “hospitality city,” Vicksburg is famous for generosity among people *and* for hefty helpings of rich, Southern food.

Lesson Hits Home. Fondren’s desire to help others flourished out of tragedy. “My sister died of cancer in 2006, but it was obesity that restricted her from living her life,” Fondren recalls. “Her last words were: ‘Linda, I wish I had lived my life more for myself.’” Within 6 months of her sister’s death, Fondren opened Shape Up Sisters, a women-only gym dedicated to helping women shed weight and improve their quality of life. She wanted to provide a safe place for local women lacking in self-esteem and motivation.

Eventually, Fondren believed she could do more. “After reaching many women, I decided that I was not reaching enough of the families who needed my help as well,” she says. This concern be-

came the motivation for Shape Up Vicksburg. “This crusade was created to help my community become more active and live as healthy a lifestyle as [we] can.”

Huge Undertaking. Fondren’s first initiative was simple. She challenged the greater Vicksburg area of 50,000 to lose a collective 17,000 pounds—or ¼ pound per person—in 17 weeks. “The first step of the campaign was realizing that the community needed help,” says Fondren. “People wanted to do good, but they needed help with tools and opportunities.” She requested support from elected officials, civic leaders, churches, schools and business leaders. She also enlisted the media in spreading the word.

“I offered free exercise and nutrition classes; I opened my gym for free every Saturday; and I asked other gyms to do the same.”

Forging Ahead. “We did not meet our goal of 17,000 pounds in 17 weeks,” concedes Fondren. “But I was persistent. I kept moving forward with the crusade and created a monthly walking club. Our T-shirts say, ‘Walking Is Cheap, Life Is Priceless.’” Dismayed that her fellow residents preferred high-fat, high-calorie food instead of fruit and vegetables, she underwent training from the Mississippi State Department of Health for a program called Bodyworks.

“Bodyworks became the perfect tool to help educate the community about nutrition,” Fondren says. “I kept motivating, and the community kept working out.”

Eventually her efforts were rewarded. “In 1 year’s time, Shape Up Vicksburg members lost, collectively, 15,000 pounds.”

Media Attention. Fondren’s efforts catapulted her into the spotlight. “Local media reported on our objectives, and the national media caught wind of it.” She was nominated as a Top 10 CNN Hero of 2010. The story of Vicksburg was highlighted on *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News*, as well as in media from China, Norway and Canada. “I was selected, together with distinguished world leaders such as First Lady Michelle Obama, as one of The Griot’s 100 History Makers in the Making for our fight against obesity.”

Getting Involved. “Shape Up Vicksburg mobilized a community to work together toward the common goal of helping each other get healthy,” Fondren says. “It has been truly inspiring to lead discussions with church leaders, passionate local activists, parents and business leaders.” But the fight against obesity is far from over.

If you want to start a community initiative, Fondren insists that you must be passionate, energetic, determined, welcoming and supportive. “Most of all, don’t take *no* for an answer,” she says. ■

Ryan Halvorson is the associate editor for IDEA, a personal trainer and a group fitness instructor.

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Calling All Trainers

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