

Poor in Greeley, Evans have hard time staying fit, healthy

By Dan England

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Rocio Miramontes parks her car in The Pines apartment complex on a hot summer afternoon. A half-mile away rests a series of units that the police visit so often, the kids who live at the Pines don't want to go near them.

Rocio knows all about them and she's a 20-year-old woman jumpy enough that vacant lots scare her because of the possibility of snakes resting in the tall grass.

Yet she begins her walk toward the neighborhoods that surround John Evans Middle School. Her air-conditioned, safe car calls to her, but she needs to walk.

That's the only way to see what she, and the residents living in poverty she was hired to serve, are up against when it comes to staying fit and healthy.

If you drive, you miss the fact that there are no sidewalks from The Pines to walk the street next to the Greeley Mall. When you walk a mile from the complex, you see fenced-in playgrounds that seem to discourage, rather than encourage, active play. On your walk, you won't see stores or even small markets that sell fruits and vegetables, but you'll probably spot some graffiti or abandoned cigarette lighters or empty beer cans and bottles. And if you drove, you'd probably even miss the fact that every grocery store, school and many parks seem to be blocked by major roads with cars careening down them, making them virtually unreachable unless you have a car, an unattainable luxury for many of the poorest residents.

"We've lost the war on poverty. We've fought that since 1960. We need a new strategy.

Mark Wallace, family physician and former president of the Greeley-Evans School District 6 board

Rocio remembers feeling frustrated that one of Evans' parks was a quarter-mile from her home, but her mother wouldn't let her cross the busy 32nd Street to get there.

But Rocio doesn't like to focus on the bad stuff. It's her job, in fact, to find the good in the large chunks of low-income neighborhoods that she walks through.

The North Colorado Health Alliance hired her as a part of its community care corps to help residents of those neighborhoods get healthy, and that mission can't be fulfilled unless she identifies the resources available to residents and then finds a way to make those resources attainable to them.

There's a playground, for example, in the middle of The Pines, and children clamber on the equipment almost every afternoon. In one of the apartments rests the Pines Resource Center, a place run by the Christ Community Church. Courtney Steitz and her husband, Andy, help with tutoring, doctors' appointments and occasional volleyball games or field trips to a city pool. The Steitzes live one apartment over.

"Our goal is to be a part of the neighborhood," Courtney said.

Rocio and the health alliance and many others acknowledge the challenges the poor face in getting, and staying, healthy.

Let's be honest: Everyone has that problem.

So just imagine adding obstacles to that goal. Just imagine not having the money, or a car, for a gym membership, or any exercise equipment, and living in a neighborhood without trails or sidewalks and plagued by crime.

Just imagine having nowhere close to buy fruits and vegetables, or having to cross a busy street to get to a store that sells them. Just imagine not really having the language, or the education, to see past the crafty marketing of food that makes it appear to be healthy when it isn't. Just imagine not having the money to buy a pair of running shoes or a uniform or a tennis racket or pay for a race or a bike.

It all begs the question: Is a healthy lifestyle now a middle-class luxury?

On a chilly morning, more than 600 adults and kids at their hips gathered to run a 5K. Greeley normally only sees this kind of a crowd at the Thanksgiving and 4th of July races, but this was April 21 at McAuliffe Elementary School.

Greeley/Evans School District 6 spread the word, but the real cause for the turnout may have been the cost. A family of four could do it for less than \$20. Most 5Ks cost more than that for one person.

"The purpose was to charge them something, so they would have some sort of buy-in to show up," said Rachel Hurshman, wellness specialist for District 6. "But we wanted it to be affordable."

Contrast that with Jessica Cooney's Ironman race. She paid \$650 to enter the triathlon. The Bolder/Boulder costs nearly \$50. The Rock and Roll Marathon costs more than \$100. Cooney worked hard to train for her Ironman. But fitness, as those prices show, isn't the only obstacle to completing them.

Cooney understands her good fortune. She heads the district's newcomer program, and that means she gets to know many of the refugees. Some of those students don't have shoes at all, let alone athletic ones. They may have a pair of jeans, but not Nike shorts. They may have a place to play where they live, but it's probably a parking lot. They don't have money for a gym, and if they could find one, they probably couldn't get to it anyway, just like they may not be able to go to practice for a school sport.

"The thought is anyone can exercise if you just put your mind to it," Cooney said. "Well, not really."

As the 5K showed, or the groups of kids who play soccer during recess or lunch at school shows, the desire is there, Cooney said. But the money isn't there. Money, not motivation, remains perhaps the biggest obstacle for those living in poverty in getting physically fit.

Mark Wallace and Vincent Atchity approached their new venture in the North Colorado Health Alliance by first acknowledging that they needed to surrender.

"We've lost the war on poverty," said Wallace, a family physician and a former president of the Greeley/Evans District 6 school board. "We've fought that since 1960. We need a new strategy."

That did not mean giving up. It meant understanding that there are going to be poor people. Their goal is to overcome the challenges they face to getting healthy, not to change their situation.

The Weld County Department of Public Health and Environment found in surveys that more adults living in lower income households report fair or poor health compared with people living in households with higher annual household incomes.

In 2010, 38 percent of adults living in households where annual income was \$15,000 or less rated their own health as fair or poor; only 3 percent did so where household income was \$75,000 or more. Only 6.3 percent rated their health as fair or poor from those making \$50,000-\$74,999 a year.

The health alliance's Make Today Count campaign tries to take the intimidation out of getting fitter. You can earn points, for instance, for eating an orange instead of a bag of chips for a snack. Spending time with your family, petting your dog or getting a good night's sleep all count as well. These goals are more realistic than running a marathon, and yet, they are healthy activities, Wallace said.

The alliance's campaign isn't just for those in poverty. But there's no doubt it targets them. The Alliance hired eight people such as Rocio to help connect residents with resources, build relationships and offer ways to get them healthy. All of them, like Rocio, walk the poorer parts of the Greeley area.

“They know they are supposed to eat healthy and be active,” Wallace said of those in poverty. “But they’ve got graver things on their plate.”

Sending people like Rocio out in the neighborhoods resembles efforts of the Peace Corps putting volunteers in poor villages all over the world, said Wallace and Atchity.

“We have to apply third-world strategies to first-world poverty,” Wallace said. “We don’t want to be seen as the organization that just tells people what to do. We don’t want to be the fit people telling others how to be fit. People understandably get turned off by that.”

Zach Armstrong, tennis coach for Greeley West, was approached by a few students who wanted to try the sport. All they needed was a physical, tennis shoes and a tennis racket.

This is the reality of coaching in District 6.

Almost two-thirds of the students in District 6 are on free or reduced lunches, and sports cost money, even when they’re playing for their school, not a traveling club. District 6 is cash-strapped, too, and many times, it’s up to coaches to hunt down uniforms and equipment for athletes in need. Last season Armstrong, now in his third year, had several refugees who had never played the game before. One of them, he said, didn’t even know what a racket was. But tennis, even with its reputation as a country-club sport, is a good choice to break into, Armstrong said. He found some racket donations and they had shoes for gym class, and that was all the kids needed, other than a desire to whack the ball.

There were, however, many other expenses that Armstrong used to take for granted. If he told them to practice at home, he had to give them a tennis ball, and he had to reassure them that public courts were there for everyone, even them. When he’d have a potluck dinner before a match, it was a burden for some players to bring a meal, and if he’d have team-bonding activities, such as a snack at Randy’s All-American Grill across the street from Greeley West, or even an awards dinner at \$5 a head, some players wouldn’t show.

Finally, it’s tougher to be a coach when you get kids who couldn’t afford lessons when they were younger. Or don’t know what a racket is.

“It’s filtering into all the sports,” Armstrong said. “We are getting natural talent, but we’re not seeing previous experience. You won’t see them in junior leagues, and so you won’t see freshmen on the varsity team.”

It’s fun to watch the beginners grow into players, Armstrong said, and there’s a certain amount of satisfaction out of coaching that comes from that. Those refugees turned out to be some of the better players on the junior varsity teams and should make varsity by their senior year.

“But others in the community don’t look at development,” he said. “They look at wins and losses.”

Jeff Cranston, athletic director for West, watches pick-up soccer games at lunch every day, and more than once, he’s approached some of the better players and asked them to try out for the school team. Usually they say no, citing cost and the fact that they have to work after school to make money for the family.

Cranston understands, as he knows participation fees, shoes, trips and a uniform, let alone extra expenses like a “spirit pack” that includes a school hoody, can be hundreds of dollars, and that’s just for one of the cheaper sports such as cross-country. He tries to help, picking up the tab for physicals for some, and he said coaches put in their own money to help their players. Booster clubs help tremendously, along with businesses.

“All school districts deal with these issues,” he said. “But we probably deal with it more than most.”

Poverty is common in District 6, and yet, Cranston sees many students overcome it, maybe with a free physical or a little help. Sometimes their sport helps open doors.

“If you go to practice, there are opportunities there,” Cranston said. “A lot of it, just like life, is just showing up.”

Just look at Nia Shumpert. Shumpert felt guilty about playing softball, both for her traveling team and for Greeley West, where she graduated in 2011. Her mother, Angela Young of Greeley, had her and two other daughters, and no one else helped pay the bills. Nia knew her traveling and paying for equipment was hard on her mother, who worked as a nurse and sometimes had to use her food credit to bring meals home from work so they could share it for dinner.

“I wanted to quit, but she didn’t want me to quit,” Shumpert said. “So I would tell myself to do it for them.”

Shumpert learned how to let others help her. She allowed a coach to pay for her trip to Florida so she could play in a tournament. She rode along with other family members. It was lonely at times because she didn’t have family in the stands cheering for her, but at least she was there.

“Letting people help me was huge,” she said.

Shumpert turned her skill into a college scholarship. She plays for Black Hills State University in South Dakota. It’s a job now, but it’s paying for her education, where she’s double majoring in art and graphic design. She hopes to turn her art into movies or TV shows.

“It gets stressful,” she said. “But I got this far, so there’s no point in giving up.”

There's definitely help out there for students who can't afford to play a sport.

"But there's a stigma attached to it," said Andy Everhart, assistant cross-country coach for University Schools and manager for Bells Running in Greeley. "Some kids could really be awesome athletes, and they're getting hurt because they're running in a cheap shoe. But we've had coaches say go to the store and we'll take care of the shoes. They would tell like six kids who needed shoes, and one kid showed up. No one wants to be the poor person."

Yet being healthy, such as eating well or getting enough exercise, affects performance at a job or in the classroom, said Dawn Hillman, principal of John Evans Middle School, one of the poorer schools in the district.

In fact, if they are healthy, it's possible they could break the cycle of poverty that haunts them. They could do well in school, go to college and get a well-paying job. Their kids, conceivably, could then play whatever sport they wanted. Just like Hillman's son.

Sports can help you feel connected to society, and if you are connected, or even if you feel that way, good things can happen. That's why Hillman helped bring Soccer Without Borders to her school.

"The refugees here weren't getting a lot of opportunities," Hillman said. "We wanted them to feel connected, and they all seemed to kick around a soccer ball."

So Hillman and Meghan Ashe brought a Soccer Without Borders chapter to Greeley in 2011 as a part of the organization's eight programs and 12 camps in four countries. The other places include Baltimore, Chicago and New York, places with huge groups of kids facing poverty. Just like Greeley.

The organization meets at John Evans and helps solve three of the major hurdles in helping those in poverty achieve fitness: It provides a safe place to go, without a need for a car to get to it, and it's free.

"When we passed out flyers, we had many kids coming up to us and telling us it sounded great, but they didn't have soccer shoes," Ashe said. "We told them we could get them shoes."

By the spring of this year, there were three competitive teams of students from Greeley West and John Evans. The chapter serves refugee and immigrant children because of the way the grants are written, but Ashe hopes to expand that into anyone who wants to play. Hillman already sees a huge difference in her students because of the program.

"They don't look at the floor any longer when they talk to you," Hillman said. "They enter the school with their heads held high."

Shukri Farah came to America seven years ago. She was originally from Somalia but had to leave because of the unrest there. She has six children aged 10 to 23

and three sons in Soccer Without Borders. She got uniforms for her kids.

The benefits of soccer, of exercise, really, are too many to count. Her kids sleep better at night. They're happier. They get good grades because Soccer Without Borders requires that. They've made new friends: They're even friends with a child from Iraq, which Farah thought was pretty neat. It's also inspired her boys to play soccer by themselves on the weekends.

"It makes them feel like they belong in the community," Farah said with the help of her daughter.

Then she says something else, something her daughter doesn't have to clarify, and it's why so many are working so hard to make things better for those who may not have the resources to do it themselves.

"Being healthy is important for life," Farah said, "not just soccer."