

March 2006 : : today's•TEEN

Teen Advocate for Healthy Eating

By Arielle Carpenter, Pine Crest School – Fort Lauderdale

Our generation is facing a crisis that has reached epidemic proportions. In fact, it has recently been predicted that we are the first generation that will not outlive the life expectancy of our parents.

What is the cause of this frightening news? Obesity. And, it is increasing at an alarming rate among children and adolescents.

Face it! We are fat. And by we, I do not mean you personally nor do I include myself. I mean “we” as in our society, and more importantly, our youth. Our nation is in the midst of a national obesity epidemic and if no action is taken, there will be consequences... for all of us. Extra weight can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis and other problems.

Almost four years ago, when I entered my local public high school as a freshman, I became disturbed by what I saw my peers eating at lunch. It seemed that the majority of students were eating their lunches from the school's vending machines; I knew something was wrong. I started to educate myself about the alarming effects of childhood obesity and the medical problems associated with it.

The school's vending machines feed high school students sugar glazed honey buns, assorted varieties of candy bars, greasy potato chips, soda, and similar snacks. I knew that in order to start improving the health of students at my school, these vending machines needed an overhaul. However, what I did not realize was that these machines provide critical and necessary revenue to the school, which was already suffering from severe budget cuts. Unfortunately, the school's administration was not in a position to be thinking of the future. In hindsight, the profits the school was making from the vending machines was minimal in comparison to healthcare costs regarding obesity later on in life.

I began a grass roots campaign as a teen advocate for healthy eating. I wrote to healthy snack food manufacturers and they sent me samples that I distributed along with literature from the Department of Health about making better food choices. Peer education was the next step towards achieving my goal. I have made presentations to students in elementary and middle schools. I aim my presentations at the younger students because they are at an age where they are beginning to make their own choices and I want to help them make the right choices.

As important as good nutrition is, so is exercise. With many schools facing budget shortages, physical education was one of the first things to be cut. But now that we are seeing the negative effects of this decision, schools are starting to add P.E. back into the curriculum. In West Virginia, which has one of the nations' worst obesity problems, the state recently purchased the video game “Dance Dance Revolution” for all of its 157 middle schools, and they hope to put it in all of their public schools in the

next three years. We need to be creative. And we need to convince kids at a young age about the importance of choosing a healthy lifestyle that includes a moderate diet along with exercise everyday.

I am very passionate about educating the community about nutrition because, without knowledge, this obesity epidemic will continue to harm our society. After watching the film, SuperSize Me, by Morgan Spurlock, I learned of a great slogan that I tell students in my presentation; they need to “vote with their forks,” meaning that we, as consumers, can make an impact on what is sold to us simply by making intelligent choices in what we decide to buy and eat. It pays to learn about food; you are what you eat.

Sponsored by Spanish River Jewish Forum

For more information, contact Alex at yankee312@aol.com or Alysha at alyshae@bocafed.org