

Changing health habits, one on one

David Riley, ROC 11:55 p.m. EDT March 29, 2014



(Photo: SHAWN DOWD, staff photographer)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- The Greater Rochester Health Foundation's Healthy Hero Street Team aims to fight childhood obesity
- Its ads have likely become familiar to many Rochester-area residents since the effort launched in 2007
- The team's work underscores how tricky it can be to persuade people to change unhealthy behaviors

A doctor's advice sometimes goes in one ear and out the other. Experts though they may be, the words of a friend, relative or neighbor can be just as likely to influence decisions about our health.

That's where Ketrell Jackson comes in.

Jackson is a member of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation's Healthy Hero Street Team, an arm of its 5-2-1-0 campaign against childhood obesity. Its ads, which exhort viewers and listeners to "be a healthy hero," have likely become familiar to many Rochester-area residents since the effort launched in 2007.

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The street team — mainly made up of college students from the city — approaches people at community events, from block parties to health fairs, and talks to students as they walk to school or at recess about, say, trading a soda for a bottle of water or finding ways to exercise.

Jackson often can be found exercising with the kids he is trying to reach.

"They can feed off of our passion," said Jackson, a 21-year-old student at Monroe Community College. "They can feed off our love that we genuinely give to the community."

Realizing that signs and jingles reach only so many people, the foundation formed the street team in 2011 to try to reach parents of elementary school-age children one-on-one, said Heidi Burke, who oversees the group.

The team's work underscores how tricky it can be to persuade people to change unhealthy behaviors or longtime eating habits without the message coming across as condescending or a lecture.

"We recognize the importance of clinicians. They're part of our strategy as well," Burke said. "But there's a different conversation that can be had when the white coat isn't on. It comes from more of a personal, friendly basis, or a concern or an interest in your welfare, as opposed from somebody giving you sort of a mandate to make some pretty significant behavior changes."

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Solution: [Healthy options at the market](#)

The message is the same as the overall 5-2-1-0 campaign: Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables, avoid more than two hours of screen time, spend an hour on active play and zero out consumption of sugary drinks.

But the team delivers that advice in a more casual tone. Jackson said he is no dietitian, but often talks about his own experience learning healthy eating and weaning himself off sugary drinks and other unhealthy choices a few years ago.

"I would consider eating a tomato slice on my cheeseburger that's drenched in grease as a healthy food back a couple of years ago," he said. "We're definitely examples. We're living proof in the community."

It's hard to measure the team's success in any concrete way, but one metric is how well-recognized its members are, Burke said.

Jackson recalled people honking their car horns and flashing him the peace sign as he walked down the street recently in one of the team's trademark purple polo shirts. He said he also has run into families with whom he has spoken before, only to pick up new ideas from them about exercising or eating better.

"We're learning and growing together," Jackson said.

DRILEY@DemocratandChronicle.com