

## Churches tackle growing health issues in black community

by Valerie M. Reynolds

Bordering on the cusp of high blood pressure and dealing with a tumultuous year during which she saw her mother suffer two strokes, Bridget Dancie, 39, knew it was time to do something about her weight, her health and her life.

She joined Weight Watchers in March, just one day before her church, the Chicagoland Christian Center, unveiled its new fitness program, A Joy To Be Fit Gospel Aerobics Ministry. Dancie started attending the weekly aerobic sessions and within the past eight months, the mother of five, has gone from a size 22 to a size 14, and has lost a total of 45 inches.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the national leading causes of death among African Americans are cardiovascular diseases, which includes heart disease, stroke and other serious coronary complications. In Illinois alone, close to 4,500 African Americans died from heart disease in 2000. Diabetes, a disease that has a rapidly growing prevalence in the black community, is also ranked as one of the leading causes of death among African Americans.

Although these diseases are leading causes of death in Americans of all races, they are affecting African Americans at a disturbingly disproportionate rate. Additionally the risk factors associated with these diseases tend to run rampant in the African-American community.

"I don't know if I would have been able to do this without the ministry; it really was a combination of both Weight Watchers and the ministry," Dancie said. "The fellowship that takes place at the aerobic sessions really makes me feel at home and not so much like I'm working out."

See CHURCHES on Page 3



Joelyn Floyd (right, front) a yoga instructor with CAFA teaches at Lilydale Baptist Church on Saturdays.  
photo by Valerie Reynolds

\* Published in the November 2003 issue of the Chicago Observer



# News & Information



Stephanie Jackson-Rowe founder of C.A.F.A. works with one of her clients. She calls her mission to help people get healthy a "calling from God."

photo courtesy of Stephanie Jackson-Rowe

## Churches respond to health issues

Continued from Page 1

### A joy to be fit

A Joy To Be Fit Gospel Aerobics Ministry is a faith-based, health and well-being program that is reaching specifically into African-American churches and compelling congregation members to understand the importance of maintaining a healthy diet and a healthy lifestyle.

It is one of several faith-based fitness ministries housed under the umbrella organization, the Christian Aerobics & Fitness Association (CAFA) founded by Stephanie Jackson-Rowe. CAFA partners with churches such as the Chicagoland Christian Center and Lilydale First Baptist Church in Roseland and provides them with a wide range of fitness programs and services such as aerobics, yoga, chair aerobics for senior members of the church and Hip Hop Hallelujah Aerobics for young members.

"We really want to motivate people in the church to take a more active role in their health," said Jackson-Rowe. The faithful interpret the gospel in terms of

their spiritual health rather than physical. "People in church tend to ignore serious health problems such as obesity and unhealthy eating habits because they believe God is not looking at them from the outside."

"We supplement our fitness programs with scriptures that tell us God wants us to be holistically healthy; that means spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically."

Jackson Rowe, 40, a certified aerobics instructor, began teaching classes in the basement of her hometown church in Westlogan 20 years ago. Since then she has traveled all over the country as an aerobics instructor.

After watching her own mother recover from a triple bypass, she realized she was not helping the people who were closest to her. So three years ago, after having worked as a marketing manager for 15 years, she started CAFA. She says that ministering a healthy way of life to church members and the people in her community is a calling from God.

Jackson Rowe is not alone in her calling. Within the past several years, faith-based programs that aim to help African Americans maintain a healthy diet and begin daily or weekly fitness regimens have been springing up in many of Chicago's churches. And in addition to fit-

ness, churches are also addressing the unique diet of African-Americans—soul food.

### Take heart

The American Heart Association recommends that to lessen your risk of disease—you need a diet of whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, poultry, fish and lean meat. In addition you should reduce your salt intake and limit foods high in saturated fat and cholesterol.

A typical after-church fellowship meal includes, but is definitely not limited to, fried chicken, homemade corn bread, macaroni and cheese, collard greens seasoned with ham hocks and a array of desserts such as peach cobbler, pound cake or apple pie.

As delicious as this food may be, it is the indulgence of fat, sodium and sugar, coupled with a lack of exercise that is leaving scores of African Americans suffering from obesity related health problems. However, many churches like Duncie's have identified the problem, and have decided to introduce healthy ways of eating and living into their fellowship services.

### Churches respond to need

Sweet Holy Spirit Church, located at 87th and South Chicago Ave. recently began a weekly fitness ministry. It started this past year when many members were on the sick and shut in list or even dying as a result of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease or breast cancer.

The church participated in National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, and also sponsored a community health fair at the end of August, which featured screenings for diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol.

"Sometimes attending Sunday church isn't enough," said Elder Patrick Shaffer, who oversees the pastoral care ministry. "We want to help the people of our church live healthy lives outside of the church and that goes beyond providing

Sunday worship services."

The American Diabetes Association (ADA) has also realized how much of a vehicle the black church can be in fighting the disease. The ADA national awareness initiative, "Diabetes Sunday" partners with churches in the African-American community to help create awareness of this serious and debilitating disease. On "Diabetes Sunday," the church

*"If the church doesn't reach out and do something when so many of our people are dying from these diseases, then they will continue to die." —Rev. Alvin Love*

shares information about diabetes with its congregation and distributes literature. The ADA also

offers a variety of year round, follow up activities for interested churches.

Rev. Alvin Love, pastor of Lilydale First Baptist Church, which partnered with the ADA last year and is a new member of CAFA, believes that these programs are essential for the African-American community.

"If the church doesn't reach out and do something when so many of our people are dying from these diseases, then they will continue to die," Love said. "The church needs to be involved in making lives better for people in the church and in the community."

Duncie firmly believes that getting healthy has to be about much more than wanting to look cute. It has to be about wanting to live better. As a result of taking control of her health, she says that she now sleeps better, has more energy during the day and, although she says she was always a confident person, she just feels better about herself as a whole. "It really is a lifestyle change," Duncie said. "And it's a change I plan to keep."

For more information about how your church can become a partner with CAFA, call Stephanie Jackson-Rowe at (773)-385-6684.

For information about "Diabetes Sunday" visit [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)