



Program Teaches Teens Proper Nutrition

Dr. Mehmet Oz Founded Healthcorps to Help Combat Childhood Obesity

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Like many U.S. teens, Jessyl DeFrank enjoyed fast food. And this high school student's eating habits were typical of many young people.

"I would get after school hungry. First stop was Chinese place, Popeye's, whatever was around, McDonald's, whatever," she said.

After the snack, she'd come home to a home-cooked meal, which wasn't always low-calorie, health-conscious fare. Now one organization aims to help kids like DeFrank learn the basics of healthy eating.

Healthcorps, which was founded by Mehmet Oz, Oprah Winfrey's favorite go-to doctor, teaches young people how to become educated consumers and make healthy food choices through in-school seminars on diet, nutrition and exercise.

The program's goal is to get kids to bring their newfound food knowledge home to their families and implement what they've learned. Healthcorps is in 36 high schools in four states, and counting

For DeFrank, the program seems to work.

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"The way I thought about it is a bag of Doritos is 25 cents; so is a banana," she said. "Go for the banana or go for the apple. You feel better and you know it's good for you."

She now even monitors what her family eats.

"I don't know when's the last time I ate fried food," said DeFrank, adding that her Dominican culture favors foods like fried plantains, fried cheese, fried salami and other greasy items. "We barely fry anything here anymore. [My mom] started incorporating more vegetables into our food."

DeFrank exemplifies what Healthcorps coordinators, like Shanequa Highsmith, try to teach teens.

"This is their life," said Highsmith, who is paid a stipend to teach children about nutrition at a Bronx, N.Y., school. "And when you can make it light and fun, and still walk away with a point, it's the best thing ever."

Among other things, Hightower helps students determine proper portion sizes. Some are surprised to learn what they believe is the appropriate amount to eat isn't even close to the recommended serving.

It's all in the hope of decreasing the nearly 17 percent of children who are obese in the United States by teaching them how to know their bodies, know what they're eating and become more physically active.