

Success Story: Greenfield Walking Group

The Greenfield Walking Group – Transforming A Park, Transforming A Community

Bakersfield mothers Gema Perez and Daliflor Loya met in 2006 during a nutrition class at the Greenfield Family Resource Center. Recognizing that physical activity was as critical to good health as eating right, they banded together to start the Greenfield Walking Group. That fall, two dozen women, many of them Spanish-speaking farm workers, began meeting for a daily walk and aerobic workout in the city's Stiern Park. The park, however, was a hazardous obstacle course, littered with hypodermic needles, broken bottles, aggressive stray dogs, roving gang members, and shot-out lights. Not only was the park dangerous, so was the route to get there, with pedestrians having to cross four lanes of high-speed traffic.

The walking group decided to take action. With the help of Jennifer Lopez of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, the group spearheaded a walkability assessment in the spring of 2007. They invited other residents, along with representatives from city agencies including police, maintenance, recreation and parks, and animal control, to tour the neighborhood together and identify problem

areas. Armed with the data they had collected, they sat down with city officials who agreed to work with them to help clean up the park and make it safe for families, and to provide the resources and services needed to maintain those improvements.

The park's transformation continued when participants in a Bakersfield Chamber of Commerce leadership development program, seeking worthy community projects to support, approached the Greenfield Walking Group to get their ideas. Walking group participants led them on a tour of the park, highlighting the need for a walking path to make the rough terrain easier to navigate for mothers pushing baby strollers and for others who could have better mobility on a flat surface. After considering several different community projects, the chamber of commerce decided on the walking path and worked in partnership with the walking group to raise \$10,000 from local businesses and to recruit 100 volunteers for the intensive workday it took to physically construct the path.

"They started early, before dawn, and it took 10 hours in the heat



The Greenfield Walking Group stops for a picture at the "new" Stiern Park.

of Bakersfield," recalls Lopez. "The volunteers came in waves, each group providing relief for the previous one—first the men, then the women, then the teenagers. The final shoveling of dirt was done by children. It was amazing."

In just two years, local health improvements were dramatic: Regular walkers have experienced substantial individual weight loss (up to 80 pounds), along with reduced stress and increased self-esteem. The group also worked with local youth on a public-private partnership to build a new playground in the park. The group is now working with researchers at UCLA to capture data illustrating the change in park usage.

But the impact extends well beyond their own community:

Greenfield Walking Group *(Continued)*

The group—now up to 60 members—is assisting those who want to increase walkability in other cities, and has joined forces with groups such as the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, It's Our Healthcare, and the California Convergence to advocate for prevention-oriented policy changes on a regional, state, and national level. A lively Fotonovela recounting their story is being distributed to 20,000 readers in eight counties throughout the Central Valley.

Featured in both print and television news reports, the Greenfield Walking Group serves as a model of how residents themselves can lead the way in creating healthy communities, working in partnership with local organizations. Local and regional officials now proactively look to the group as a resource before launching new projects. Recently, planners working on a regional blueprint for Kern County development solicited the group's input on a regional vision and growth principles for the integration of transportation, housing, land use, economic development, and environmental protection

that will inform decision-making and guide growth over the next 50 years.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program is the Central California Public Health Partnership's initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.

For more information:

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program: www.ccropp.org, (559) 228-2140

Jennifer Lopez, Healthy Living Outreach Facilitator, Bakersfield, CA, (661) 205-3743,
jelopez@kern.org