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Fitness for Life initiative sparks improved health, quality of life for Grant County residents

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By Vickie Ashwill
NKY Thrives

Based on recent national news coverage, you might think that Williamstown and Grant County put themselves on the map this year with the opening of Ark Encounter, the life-size replica of Noah's Ark.

But improving quality of life through health initiatives had already made them a model for Kentucky and is making a difference for the kids and adults who live there. The organization behind it, Fitness for Life Around Grant County (FFLAG), was created in 2002 to focus on decreasing obesity in county school children.

Today, FFLAG includes community and workplace health initiatives and is a driver of grants and funding to support continued positive change.

"It's a wide diversity of people coming together for the same reason — to make Grant County a better, healthier place to live," Williamstown Mayor Rick Skinner says. "It's a quality of life issue."

State statistics reflect continuing improvements

Grant County improved from 89th in the state in 2010 to 58th in 2016 in health outcomes that measure poor health, incidence of disease and death. In health factors — which include obesity, disease and behaviors such as drinking and smoking — Grant County improved as well, going from 40th in 2015 to 39th in 2016.

It's a big change, Skinner says. "You see people walking all the time," adding that, not too long ago, most residents stayed inside.



Fitness for Life Around Grant County aims at improving quality of life through walking, weight management, healthy workplaces and more (provided photos)



FFLAG's steering committee is made up of business owners,

"The progress in Grant County is a model for LiveWell NKY," says Elizabeth Steffer, FFLAG's secretary and health educator in the Northern Kentucky Health Department.

LiveWell rolled out earlier this year, representing a movement focused on creating a culture of good health across the nine counties of Northern Kentucky. FFLAG Chairman Jeff Walters was the keynote speaker at a recent convening of the LiveWell pilot community coalitions, encouraging them to "stay the course and dream big."

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A grant from the **Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky** made it possible to put walking paths around Grant

County schools and add sidewalks. The final phase includes sidewalks on Arnie Risen Road from Williamstown to Dry Ridge's city limits.

Sleffer says that kids have historically been unable to get to schools or parks safely and FFLAG wanted to improve connectivity.

Williamstown passed a Complete Streets policy, mandating that every road must include ways to make it usable for all, including walkers and bikers. Grant County followed, making it the first Kentucky county to adopt the policy.

Another grant from **Interact for Health** is funding a feasibility study for a countywide trail system, Skinner says.

Walters says his favorite healthy initiative is Worksite Wellness, a program that encourages employees of local businesses to get healthy by providing education and wellness programs.

"Worksite Wellness has gone from two to 22 businesses participating," he says.

LiveWell is getting ready to launch its own workplace initiative on Aug. 4, in part based on the success of FFLAG.

Walters's business, Performance Pipe, participates in the Worksite Wellness program by offering employees free bottled water, annual health checks, flu shots and healthy choices from the company's vending machines.

"The buy-in has been great," Skinner says. "The businesses realize it helps lower their insurance rates, too."

Personal stories underscore FFLAG's success

Josh Sharp of Corinth joined the FFLAG's "Biggest Winner" weight-loss challenge, a choice that has changed his life and his career. Once a computer tech working in a cubicle, Sharp now weighs in at 219 pounds, down 155 pounds from his heaviest point.

Sharp is now working to be a trainer and plans to start a health supplements business. He is also giving back to the community to share what he learned, including programs for kids.

"I'm paying it forward," he says.

To learn more about these health programs, visit LiveWellINKY.org and getfitgc.org.



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