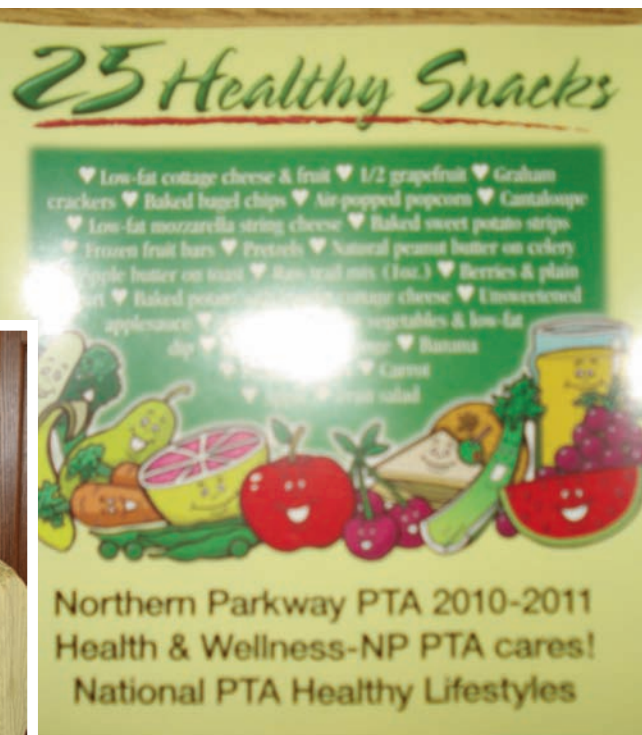


# Northern Parkway PTA Makes Health a Habit

By Marilyn Ferdinand

Health and fitness have been on the agenda of Northern Parkway Elementary School for quite some time, thanks to the concerted efforts of its involved and active PTA officers and members. For the past five years, the Northern Parkway PTA has held a popular and well-attended Family Fun and Fitness Night and has complemented the activities and information provided to families at this annual event with parenting workshops on nutrition and fitness, among other topics of interest, held in the community throughout the school year. In 2009, Northern Parkway PTA decided to expand their efforts with the help of a Healthy Lifestyles grant from National PTA.



PTA board member, Donna King, helped make health and fitness a priority for the students of Northern Park Elementary School.

## The school community

Northern Parkway Elementary, located on Long Island just outside New York City, serves 780 families with children in kindergarten through 5th grade. Donna King, a dedicated PTA board member as well as 5th Grade Committee co-coordinator and Three For Me coordinator, has served in every capacity but president at her local unit—wherever her interests and the needs of her PTA took her. She applies her own all-hands-on-deck approach to getting the entire school community involved in PTA.

“We like to involve students in PTA,” says King. “For example, we have PTA challenges that engage students creatively. We had them develop and submit commercials to use in membership recruitment. We recruit PTA liaisons among students in the 3rd grade and up who tend not to get involved, making them responsible to take PTA announcements back to their classrooms to send home in students’ backpacks. It helps the students take some pride in themselves and works for us in getting our messages to the parents.”

More than 50 percent of the families in the school community are native Spanish speakers, a change that has occurred in over the past 12 years that King has been involved in Northern Parkway PTA. The PTA unit has adapted to this rapid change in the community’s population by translating most of its communication materials into Spanish. “Through efforts like this, we are attempting to be proactive in our outreach to parents who may have limited English ability, yet want their children to succeed,” says King. “I believe that our PTA has the children at heart, and that means that all parents receive a warm welcome.”

## Healthy Lifestyles

Because of Northern Parkway PTA’s desire to reach their diverse school community with a broader range of healthy lifestyles information, the board decided to apply for a Healthy Lifestyles grant. Then PTA President Deborah Crayton, PTA Recording

Secretary Denise Bernardi-Sinnona, and King put together a proposal that included moving the Family Fun and Fitness Night from its traditional spot in March to November 2010 to coincide with PTA Healthy Lifestyles Month and outlined a series of workshops on nutrition, health and safety, and fitness that would be held in February, March, and April 2011 for the entire Northern Parkway community. Northern Parkway Principal Heidi Smith’s guidance and support were critical to the execution of the grant application. National PTA approved a \$1,000 grant to put their plan into action.

Serving on the 2010-2011 Healthy Lifestyles Committee and critical to its outreach success were Assistant Principal Bilal Polson, physical education teacher Lisa Daube, and Adelita Forbes, who translated various pieces of information from English to Spanish. The PTA publicized the events through their monthly PTA meeting flyers, PTA student liaison announcements, and an automated communication system that sends messages to all students’ contact phones.

The grant allowed Northern Parkway PTA to increase the nutrition-related information provided to every child at their school, including:

- 101 healthy snacks bookmarks in English and Spanish
- My Pyramid placemats
- A nutrition kit containing
- *Eat Smart, The New Food Pyramid And You!* workbooks
- *Facts on Fast Food* nutritional guide to 104 menu choices
- Pencils
- 25 Healthy Snacks magnets
- *101 Ways To Wellness* brochure
- 50 Heart-Healthy Superfoods bookmark
- The pocket pal brochures *Walking for Fitness, Fruit & Veggies, The More the Better*, and *Know Your Numbers*

King used the My Pyramid guide as the foundation for the workshops: “I covered one of three food groupings on the pyramid in each workshop. February’s workshop was on grains and vegetables; March, fruits and milk; and April, meat, beans, and oils. I reached out to five local businesses and got donations to provide the foods featured at each Healthy Lifestyles workshop. I also provided recipes for healthier living, articles on Vitamin D and other vitamin information sheets, and a hands-on demonstration of safe food handling and fruit and vegetable washing, which is especially important if you cannot afford organic produce.”

## Results

“We always have had a good turnout for Family Fun and Fitness Night,” says King, “but we also had good attendance of teachers and administrators at the spring workshops.” Crayton says, “The events benefited PTA by erasing some of the stereotypes, for example, that we have too many meetings and that we are always raising money! We were able to offer a lot and bring parents, children, and staff together.” Bernardi-Sinnona says the goodwill created in the community was a great boost for the PTA: “We received such positive feedback from the community. Not only did parents find the information valuable, but they also learned of places in the community that fit their budget while allowing for healthy meal options, and ways they could incorporate fitness into their families’ daily lives.”

The PTA organizers learned some lessons as well. King warns against one volunteer wearing too many hats because crucial tasks may not get completed. “Definitely assign tasks within your committee beyond just running the workshops,” says King. “Have a registration person and a photographer to record the event and provide statistics. Use the registration information—name, children’s names and ages, phone number and other contact information—for follow-up. People come and pick up the information we provide, but are they really using it? In terms of what the grant is meant to accomplish, we don’t know exactly how effective we were. It wouldn’t cost anything to put a survey in the teachers’ mailboxes to distribute.”

## Why PTA

King relates that “PTA has been a means for me to stay sane and be creative. I already knew the value of being involved at school because my mom was an educator, so I had a feel for what I wanted for my children.” Ultimately, King sees PTA as the answer to many challenges facing education today. “People need to know that the time they give to their children is valuable,” says King. “Their service in the school and community gives them a picture of where their value lies. Even if you don’t have a lot of money, if you put the time in, the value comes back. Even though it is becoming harder in the times we’re living in, this is an answer—your children are worth your time.”

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*Marilyn Ferdinand is the editor of Our Children.*

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