the YMCA™

FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

WE'RE HERE FOR GOOD

Celebrating 150 Years of Service to the Erie Community

An advertising supplement to the Erie Times-News

Sunday, November 21, 2010

Always here for you

From our beginnings 150 years ago, the YMCA of Greater Erie's legacy has been about the inspirational stories shared from the individuals the Y has helped. Each year of our history has been marked by undeniable accomplishments in the face of the challenges of changing times, but more than anything, what marks our history is our commitment to helping people. The Y is a safe, reliable community resource where both the young and young-at-heart can learn, grow, be accepted and connect with family and community members.

The Y's impact in our community extends well beyond our gyms and pools. The Y is the largest provider of healthy living, youth development and social responsibility programs in Erie County.

Our mission is not static. It's not a destination. It evolves to meet the needs of the communities we serve and the individuals that depend on our programs and services. Understanding our mission is important. Our dedication to deliver on that mission is critical. But, it's equally imperative that we connect on a more personal level to the people that are part of our Y family. We need to know names, faces and hear their stories.

Members of the Y realize they are not just casual users of a facility but connected, committed members of a Y community. People have come to the Y for many reasons over the years — it began with Erie's first library and adult education classes for immigrants, then discussion and prayer groups and affordable housing. Erie's first basketball games, swimming pools, organized camp for boys and the first public playgrounds all originated with the Y. Soon began suburban outreach work, and the building of the Glenwood, Eastside and County Ys, prayer breakfasts for elected officials and the creation of "day care" centers. Today, four Y branches offer a variety of recreational and fitness programs, 21 early-care and school-age enrichment centers provide care to infants as young as six weeks, 11 summer camp locations create an unforgettable summer for school-age children, and 1 public camping and recreation center makes lasting memories.

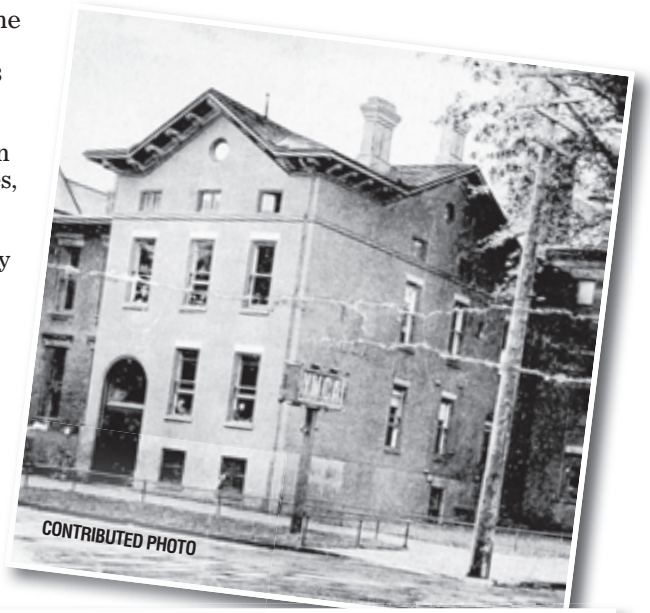

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PHOTO BY ROB ENGELHARDT

And while our 150 years of mission work is due to the multiple generations of committed and responsive leaders, the equally important players in this milestone achievement are our volunteers, donors and our employees. To them, we are eternally indebted. To all of you, who advance our mission each and every day, in small but significant ways, thank you for your continued support. Your support has impacted someone you may never meet, but rest assured that you made the impossible possible for that person.

NEW Y LOOK. SAME Y VALUES.

Sometimes we all need a little sprucing up. For the first time in 43 years, the YMCA unveiled a refreshed brand to reinforce our cause and impact as one of the leading nonprofits in the nation. We will call ourselves by the name that most people already use: the Y. Individual locations will continue to refer to themselves as "the Y," "the YMCA" or their branch name. Don't worry. Our mission and commitment to the community is the same as ever. In fact, it is probably even stronger.

By making it clear that our Y strengthens the foundations of community through youth development, healthy living and social responsibility, we shed light on the mission of the YMCA: To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all.

Youth Development: Nurturing the potential of every child and teen.

The Y believes that all kids deserve the opportunity to discover who they are and what they can achieve. That's why, through the Y, thousands of Erie's youth today are engaged in programs that encourage Y core-values – character, honesty, respect and responsibility. Unique community partnerships with the City of Erie and the Erie Housing Authority serve Erie's most at-risk, underserved kids and teens directly in their neighborhoods. In our membership and program centers, award-winning child care, before & after school care, summer camp, youth sports, swimming, youth fitness, leadership, mentoring and volunteerism, are all Y programs that are helping Erie's kids and teens reach their full potential.

Healthy Living: Improving health and well-being.

Through advocacy and leadership, the Y is a leading voice on health and well-being. With a mission centered on balance, the Y brings families closer together, encourages good health and fosters connections through fitness, sports, fun and shared interests. As a result, thousands of Erie's youth, adults and families are receiving the support, guidance and resources needed to achieve greater health and well-being for their spirit, mind and body.

Social Responsibility: Giving back and providing support to our neighbors.

Across Erie County, the Y helps people give back and assist our neighbors by offering them opportunities to volunteer, advocate and support programs that strengthen community. At the Y, we are a volunteer-founded, volunteer-led organization. Volunteers are found at every level of the Y – in child care, health & wellness, youth mentoring, board leadership and more. Through the Y's We Build People community support campaign, the Y provides financial assistance and income-based membership rates so that everyone can benefit from Y programs and membership. Additionally, the Y partners with other area nonprofits enabling our members to support the community through donations and volunteerism.

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Better together with the Y

There is rarely an instance in a person's life in which the Y does not play a role.

The Y removes barriers to health and wellness, aids youth development, assists personal achievement and gives a direct connection to nature in the midst of a harried society. To a family, we might be their favorite pool. To a child, we might be their best friend. To an adult, we might be the second chance they so desperately need. All in all, we're in the business of human potential.

We believe that lasting personal and social change can only come about when we all work together. That's why, at the Y, strengthening community is our cause.

We know that when we work together as one, we can move people forward. That's why we are committed to providing support to our neighbors and opportunities for kids, adults and families to learn, grow and thrive.

William

William is just 11 years old. William had diabetes.

In 2009, Y Program Director John Gilmore, or Coach John as he was known by the thousands of participants and graduates of his massively successful youth sports program at the Glenwood Y, had a gift for reaching all levels of kids regardless of their ability. John could engage and convert the shyest child and soon have even the most intimidated kids running up and down the gym, shooting baskets or kicking goals and whooping with joy at this experience. John was an avid cyclist and weight lifter despite living with Type 1 diabetes. John passed away unexpectedly in March 2009. In his honor and in direct response to the growing number of children with diabetes, the Y established the John Gilmore Scholarship Fund for Diabetes Camp. As one of the largest nonprofit organizations in Erie County, the Y raises money through its community support campaign We Build People to send a number of Erie's youth to Diabetes Camp at YMCA Camp Fitch.

William was among the 10 children which received scholarships from the Y to attend Diabetes Camp for one week at YMCA Camp Fitch. For young William, he forged friendships and learned about diabetes through recreation, education and mentoring.

"We learned about other people who have diabetes. We learned to count 'carbs' and about the affects of diabetes. We felt the consequences of diabetes being treated poorly by playing games. In one game, we got blindfolded and tried to pour a glass of water. I dumped it all on the ground. I felt pretty bad because I didn't want to end up like that.

I learned how to kayak. It was fun kayaking with other people, and bumping into them. In canoeing class, we tipped over the canoe, and helped each other back up.

I enjoyed myself jumping into the pool early in the morning at Polar Bear. I tried to do that every day.

I really enjoyed it, and I would like to come back next year."

Lisa Walters

For Y volunteer Lisa Walters, learning that her close friend was again diagnosed with breast cancer, this time a stage 4, was very upsetting. Lisa, a mother of an 8 year-old, couldn't imagine how her friend, 10 years younger, had the stamina to handle cancer treatment and also raise her family. Lisa began to research the effects of cancer treatment on physical strength and modeled a health and wellness program at the Y on her findings.

"One of the most important recovery tools for cancer patients is keeping their strength up. This task is a necessary and sometimes unbearable feat to accomplish. Sometimes when you get this diagnosis it seems like a death sentence. Activities through Cancer Treatment and Beyond (ACT) teaches us to live strong and live better."

The program, designed to meet the physical needs of cancer patients and survivors, was developed out of a resounding need from cancer patients who were physically active before being diagnosed and were unsure of the types of exercise they could do because of treatment-related effects.

The ACT program is a healthy living community outreach program and is open to the public. ACT is supported by the Y's annual community support campaign We Build People.

"This program is a marriage of the Y's mission and a very serious community need. It fulfills me and the other Y volunteers that work in this program to know our program participants are regaining their strength and flexibility and receiving the support and friendship they need."

Emily Lander and Mark Wassell

This past January, Erie Attorney Mark Wassell decided to swim the bay. Although a swimmer, he had never swum any great distance in open water. Still he was determined to swim the one-mile Erie Bay Swim sponsored by the Presque Isle Partnership in June.

Mark met Y Aquatic Coordinator Emily Lander. "During the next five months, we trained together for the big day. Initially, I worked Mark through training drills to improve his efficiency in water, to refine his swimming technique and to increase his endurance," says Emily. "It was not long after our training began that Mark started calling me 'coach'!"

Mark says that the Bay Swim seemed like the perfect goal. "The Bay Swim was not a competitive race, but nonetheless, provided a significant challenge for me to take seriously and would require hours of preparation to successfully complete. Emily's coaching was extremely effective and helpful. The early morning workouts at the Y and the intensity of some of the training drills paid off."

One big obstacle did arise as his training progressed. During long swims to develop endurance, Mark at times experienced difficulty breathing. After visits to a doctor in March and April, he learned he had a mild case of asthma. Mark was fortunate. His doctor encouraged him to continue his workouts. He also had Emily in his corner, who understood his condition and gave him the motivation he needed to work through it.

On June 26, Mark, with Emily cheering him on, completed the Bay Swim, accomplishing his goal set six months prior.

"It was an exciting morning," says Emily. "Mark was prepared and so was I. As Mark came out of the water at the Erie Yacht Club, he was tired, but he had a smile on his face. He gave me a big hug, thanking me for my help."

"It was extremely satisfying to have set my goal and to have achieved it," says Mark. "I have really come to appreciate the health benefits of swimming and have found myself to be extremely comfortable in water. I will continue to be a swimmer."

And, for "Coach" Emily, seeing Mark pull himself out of the water after his big accomplishment was one of the most satisfying moments of her life. "I now have a great friend and swimming partner. I am now teaching Mark the butterfly. He is already starting to think of his next goal in the water, possibly a longer open water swim. Helping Mark was my most amazing accomplishment!"

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Ensure a brighter future

Kids learn how to do the right thing at the Y. All Y youth learn about the character development building values of Caring, Honesty, Respect and Responsibility in programs like early care, after school, summer camp, art club, flag football, soccer, floor hockey, swimming, basketball, youth fitness and more. Programs teach more than physical and technical skills. They provide lifelong values and inner growth.

Y programs also teach kids that self-respect, independence, appreciation of God's world around them and the ability to get along with others are tools needed to prepare for success and to become productive citizens.

Tommy's Story

Three-year old Tommy sat on the edge of the pool at the Eastside Y. While he sat with his "bubble" on his back, he was unaware that he would become one of the top swimmers in the nation and sign a Division I swimming scholarship at the University of Buffalo.

The Y's swim teams have been an integral part of the Y experience for over 50 years. Thousands of young men and women have practiced at and competed for Ys over the decades. They have formed friendships that last, learned skills that have benefited the community and inspired future generations to enjoy the wonderful experiences that the sport has to offer.

Memories of swimmers in the region would fill the pages of a history book – Y Nationals, riding the bus on away trips, singing "If I were an Oscar Meyer Weiner" and carrying the "You Gotta Love It" banner.

"The Ys swimming program brings together a diverse group of people that I ordinarily would have never met; I made lifelong friendships. Through the Y, I gained life lessons that I have with me today," says Tommy. "Swimming taught me that if I put my mind to something, I can achieve it. This life lesson has helped me in and out of the classroom. I realize not every swimmer will achieve success, but every swimmer can compete, learn, set goals and gain a self esteem that will carry them throughout life."

Justin's Story

On any given afternoon, Downtown Y Teen Center Director Jeremiah Landis estimates 30-40 teens are at the Y for one reason or another. "With not many options for teenagers after school, the Teen Center offers a safe and healthy environment for teens where they can be themselves and connect with others."

For teen member Justin, the Y is the place where he belongs. "Instead of going home and doing things alone after school, I can come to the Teen Center and hang out with the other kids."

Justin is an eighth grader at Pfeiffer Burleigh Elementary School and comes to the Teen Center often. "I believe that the activities that the Teen Center offers have put me on the path to having a healthier life and have exposed me to positive role models. I love being able to work out and play basketball while not being worried about being judged."

Justin also thinks really highly of Jeremiah. "It's great to have an adult that relates to us kids. He's like an adult and a friend at the same time".

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"I believe that we are making strides in the community by giving teenagers a safe place to go to after school. The choices for a teen are limited when making a decision on what to do after school," says Jeremiah.

From swimming to basketball and weight lifting to yoga, the Y has a wide range of activities for teens. It's a place where they can come all at once, but because of its location — central in the city's downtown — Jeremiah says the evening is "teen time." The outreach is done through the schools and neighborhood centers and the Y's Kids Clubs which are conducted at the Erie Housing Authority's John Horan Garden Apartments and Erie Heights.

"Each day, the teens come to the Y for recreation activities, socialization and life skills. We provide a daily snack, homework help and a healthy dinner," says Jeremiah. Teens who can't afford a Y teen membership can work with him to get assistance from money the Y raises through its community support campaign We Build People. Teens come to the Y for as little as $5.60 per week or $7.20 per month and participate fully as a teen in the program.

Jeremiah takes the Y's mission very seriously and feels gratified by helping the community through his work. Teens who come through the doors each day can at least know they are in a haven for healthy activities.

"Here at the Y Teen Center we strive for excellence. We make sure that every single teenager that steps through the doors feels comfortable. The Teen Center acts a guide into adulthood so all teens must take on the responsibility of their own actions and respect Y staff and property," says Jeremiah.

Kalene & her son Kaden

Two year-old Kaden can count to 10 by himself. His mom, Kalene, realized this during one of those wonderful mommy 'aha!' moments when your child's development has taken place right before your eyes and you didn't even realize it.

"I've been taking Kaden to Play & Learn at the Y. During circle time, he loves to sing 10 Little Indians," says Kalene. "One day at home, I realized he could count to 10 all by himself!"

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Play & Learn is a free community program offered by the Y at the Eastside Y and also as a satellite program in Union City. Now in its second year, the program aims to provide parents with the tools they need to interact with their child and their child with other children in a supportive environment.

Kaden is an only-child and for Kalene she was hopeful that through Play & Learn he would learn social skills and appropriate behavior in a structured setting. What she didn't expect was how much she would learn. "Observing and talking with other parents as we play with our kids helped me feel more comfortable with my son's age-appropriate behavior, which, at home, gets frustrating at times! It's nice to have a program that allows me time to play with him in a relaxed setting away from the stresses of home. I'm continuously learning new and different ways to play and help him learn. Kaden looks forward to going to the Y every week."

For Kaden, his moments of discovery, are many. "Mommy, want to hear me count to 10?"

Sue Jones ✦

"Growing up, my family and I were very poor. There were many times my brother and I went without because my mom would trade our food stamps for alcohol. We would be sent house to house with a box to collect food. It was very embarrassing. In eighth grade, after moving many times, I started hanging out with the wrong crowd and experimenting with drugs, which eventually led to selling; I finally had an income to help with expenses.

It was an employment opportunity between the Y and my school that provided me with the guidance and mentoring that I needed to get my life back on track. The older lady at the Y that trained me was amazing. She not only took the time to train me, but also listened to me babble about my life. I was beginning to feel a sense of self-worth for the first time in my life. After 20 years, I am still very involved with the Y and truly believe in its mission."

The Durst Family

Everyone at the Glenwood Park Y knew three-year old Michael D. (for there was another Michael in his class). Like most kids, Michael experienced an adjustment period when he joined his class, but for Michael, it was patient and committed teachers at the Y that helped him progress.

"Michael's adjustment period was about 8 months long! Michael's speech was delayed when he started at the Y. He had trouble communicating with words and others had trouble understanding him," says Lynn Durst. "His first four months were spent crying all day long, and I mean all day long. Some mornings when I would drop off Michael at the Y, he would have already started crying on the ride there. I would look at his teacher Miss Kim and wonder if the day would come when he didn't cry."

The staff at the Y – Miss Kim and Miss Sandra – continued to work with Michael and the rest of the class at the same time. Miss Sandra would sit and rock with Michael most of the day trying to comfort him. Mr. Paul would take Michael under his wing and walk down to his office and spend some time together trying to calm him down and usually sharing a snack.

"Everyone knew Michael. From the teachers in the older classrooms to the other children's parents – everyone greeted him with a HUGE smile and a 'Hi Michael D.' Slowly, the crying would decrease to four hours per day," says Lynn. "The teachers were able to work with Michael to get him to use some sign language to express what he needed and wanted. The crying slowed to two hours, then 5 minutes!"

Lynn and Miss Kim knew the day had finally arrived. Michael was able to start participating in class activities throughout the day. Michael even started to talk. His speech still had a far way to go.

"If you really focused, you could make out what he was trying to tell you. Miss Kim and Miss Sandra never gave up on him," says Lynn. "By August, Michael enjoyed going to the Y. He was speaking in three word sentences, going swimming, and bringing home artwork. He was able to follow the class rules and was eating all the meals prepared for him by the Y. Michael used to be a picky eater."

Michael had made such progress. Lynn was not prepared for what came next.

Michael was getting ready to change classrooms from the 3-year-old room to the 4-year-old room. She was concerned that Michael would regress. It was with Miss Kim's reassurance that the Dursts transitioned Michael to the 4-year-old room.

"The next classroom was right down the hall and his teachers would be Miss Cindy and Miss Sharron. At first, Michael had trouble adjusting, but nothing like before."

Michael's speech became stronger and stronger and would continue to do so over the next year. A speech therapist did work with Michael once a week and would show Miss Cindy how to continue the lessons when the therapist wasn't there.

"Every morning, Michael was greeted with a smile from Miss Cindy and she would say, 'Good morning Michael,' and he would respond, 'Good morning, Miss Cindy'. This was music to my ears!"

Every once in a great while, a quick tear was shed by Michael as his mom left, but it never lasted more than two minutes. "Michael was confident enough to stand in the hallway for goodbyes and say 'Mommy, pick me up! I love you!'"

Michael was counting on his own, naming objects, reciting ABCs and was able to communicate verbally.

"Michael started at 4-year-old preschool this fall and transitioned very well. Michael did cry for the first week but only about 15 or 20 minutes. He's almost mastered writing his name and makes many of his own choices at home verbally."

"We cannot express our gratitude for the long, hard work, patience and commitment from the Y to helping Michael grow not only with his speech, but to conquer his fears and have the confidence to express himself. The kindness and love that was shown to Michael everyday by the staff went beyond expectations. From the bottom of our hearts, we are forever grateful."

Kelly Austin

Sixteen years ago, Y Aquatic Director Kelly Austin made a decision, one she says impacted the rest of her life. She was just 17 years old and had made the decision to join the lifeguarding staff at the Glenwood Park Y. She recalls that she had no idea how immeasurable the decision would be in her life.

"From that moment on, June 16, 1994, my life was forever changed. I realized very quickly, that as a lifeguard, many people were looking at me to be a problem solver and a leader. I liked how being a lifeguard made me feel – empowered and in charge! Youth would come into the pool and look at me as a role model. Adult members would share their own Y story," says Kelly.

It wasn't long after joining the Y staff that Kelly realized how much she truly enjoyed the position of lifeguard as well as other aspects of aquatics including fitness, coaching and recreation. The opportunities Kelly recalls that were available to her to grow in an aquatics profession were endless.

➤ Please see **PAGE 7**

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It's good for the heart

We know firsthand how difficult it can be to find balance in life. That's why at the Y we focus on developing the potential of kids, improving health and well-being, and giving back and supporting our neighbors.

Being healthy means more than simply being physically active. It's about maintaining a balanced spirit, mind and body. The Y is a place where you can work toward that balance by challenging yourself to learn a new skill or hobby, fostering connections with friends through our lifelong learning programs, or bringing your loved ones closer together through our many family-centered activities. At the Y, it's not about the activity you choose as much as it is about the benefits of living healthier on the inside, as well as, the outside.

Maggie Eimers

Maggie had a difficult year. Her grandmother had a stroke and died a month later. She'd established, without realizing it, a pattern of crash diets and a start/stop exercise routine. For Maggie, this time, it had to be different.

"My goal this time, was to become more comfortable with myself by eating sensibly and moving more. I specifically wanted something I could sustain in my crazy life schedule, something enjoyable enough to motivate me," says Maggie.

The very popular, Latin-dance inspired class Zumba was the ticket for Maggie. "My friend Tracey encouraged me to join her for the class. I now take Zumba three times per week. I love the way my body moves because of the flexibility it provides. It's about more than weight. This exercise is about feeling good emotionally and physically. There's a real sense of community at the Y in general, and in Zumba, between the instructors and people in class. We care for each other and want everyone to succeed in their goals."

Maggie says she feels better, now a size 10 instead of a 16. It wasn't just exercise alone though that helped Maggie reach her goal – a series of dietary changes – including no soda and no second helpings – led to Maggie's goal of shedding 30 pounds.

"I love getting healthier all the time and knowing that life is more fun when I feel well. Our bodies crave movement. Feed that craving and life gets better all the time! Now I look forward to living longer and enjoying every day as the gift from God it truly is. Thanks YMCA!"

Janet Klemm ✦

Having her third child in her late 30s, this Glenwood Park Y member for 30 years, struggled to lose the nearly 60 pounds of weight gained with her last pregnancy. In January 2010, nearly 18 years after the birth of her child, she was at her all time high weight of 200 pounds.

Through a partnership with Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, Ys offer nutrition, relaxation, healthy lifestyle classes right on site at Y branches.

Paired with a Y Wellness Coach, this Y member enrolled in the Highmark Wellness Program Drop 10 in 10, a 10 week weight management program designed to help participants lose 10 pounds or 10 percent of their body weight through an intensive program of optimal nutrition, regular exercise and behavior change. Studies show that reducing weight by 10 percent can reduce the risk or improve the management of chronic diseases associated with excess weight, such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

Consultations with a personal nutrition coach helped this Y member address diet as it related to weight management, heart health and other health issues.

Increased cardio, strength training and stretching, as well as significant changes in her diet, have led to a 30 pound weight loss.

"I am feeling stronger, sleeping better and my acid reflux has improved. I do allow myself a sweet treat every once in a while! The Y is important to me for my physical and mental health."

Lisa Stuczynski

If only when Lisa Stuczynski's husband won a six-month membership to the Y from a company golf outing, she'd realized how her life would change.

"I was going to put the membership on Craig's List and sell it. But, then I thought, maybe this is what God wanted me to do as there was no way I could afford a Y membership on my own."

After sampling some group classes, Lisa found a Pilates class that improved Lisa's physical activity and the support she needed to make some changes in her lifestyle. Since starting in June 2009, Lisa has lost more than 70 pounds, eliminated white food, alcohol and, after smoking for 30 years, has quit.

"I am addicted to exercise – even keep my clothes in the car . . just in case. The Y has not only transformed by body, but my attitude, my life. I will be forever grateful."

Charles Woodard

A place of fellowship, that is how Charles Woodard describes his relationship with the Y. Charles, 57, who has been a member of the Downtown Y since the age of 8, is found most afternoons on the Mezzanine area at the Downtown Y using his favorite machine, "The Beast." Always in a talking mood, Charles loves to socialize with the members and staff as they pass by him on his machine.

Charles' connection with the Y goes far beyond the everyday workout and friendly chatter at the Y. This past year, Charles lost more than 80 pounds through a series of healthy lifestyle changes. Watching his portion sizes and eliminating sugar and white flour from his diet played a huge part in Charles' nutritional changes, but when it came to changes in his fitness, Charles looked no further than the Y.

Charles truly believes that the Y supported his physical and emotional needs during his weight loss journey. Charles says the support of the staff and comraderie of the guys in the "Men's Health Center" were the daily motivators that he relied on. "They really kept me going."

Even after losing 80 pounds, Charles has no plans on slowing down. "I love the Y and couldn't imagine it not being part of my every day routine." Sunny, as he is known to most members, recently asked for a new Y shirt seeing that all the ones that he owned were too large for him. He was given a size large and couldn't have been happier.

✦ Not her real name

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Phyllis Miller

Phyllis Miller made up her mind to lose some weight on April 28, 2010. She weighed 198 pounds.

Since that decisive day, Phyllis has walked 712 miles, approximately the distance between Erie and Myrtle Beach.

Now at her lowest weight in 42 years, 167 pounds, Phyllis has reduced her clothing size from a size 18 to a size 12. Through a combination of emotional support, nutritional changes and exercise, Phyllis says, "I attribute my newfound weight loss to the Y – the coaches have played a huge role in the way I look and feel today."

Dave Piotrowicz

"I am a regular at the Y," says Dave Piotrowicz. "I've been coming on and off again since the 1980s when I played in the Industrial Basketball League at the Glenwood Y."

His family spent quite a bit of time at the Y then — using the pools and other Y facility amenities. Now, with his family all grown, Dave continues to come to the Y, as an active SilverSneaker. "I've had a series of health problems the past few years including a pacemaker and a heart transplant. Everything seemed to be falling apart in my body."

Upon completion of physical rehabilitation at Saint Vincent Health Center, Dave continued his routine at the Y.

"The Y has helped me tremendously since then and I don't see me every leaving the Y! I feel like I have a home at the Y!"

Tracey Bemis

Forty-year-old Tracey Bemis stepped on the scale. Never would she have admitted to herself that she weighed 302 pounds.

The wife of an avid runner and martial artist and mother of two active children, Tracey had already watched her mom bury two of her brothers. "I wasn't about to let her go through that pain again by burying her daughter. What kind of role model was I for my kids?" asks Tracey.

The summer of 2007, Tracey was sitting in the lobby of the YMCA and came upon an application for the Y's second Ultimate Weight Loss Challenge. "Thinking I would NEVER be picked for this, I reluctantly filled out the application and turned it in." Within a couple of weeks, Tracey received a phone call from the Y and discovered she would be one of 16 participants (out of 125 applicants) that would make up two teams to compete in the Challenge.

Tracey's first appointment at the Y with a wellness coach was to complete a series of basic health screens to include her body mass index, strength, flexibility and endurance. The screens measured her actual body age and compared it to her chronological age. "I weighed 302 pounds and my body age was 51. I remember thinking, I'm 40! No time for tears. I walked out of that office and got on a treadmill for the first time in my life."

During the next six months Tracey committed herself to several lifestyle changes. "I was focused and determined to take control of my life. My routines at the Y included muscle and strength as well as cardiovascular. I included a combination of machine workouts, group exercise classes and water fitness."

Tracey says that with the help of Y wellness coaches she overcame many personal obstacles. "This was a very stressful and emotional time. As I lost weight, I had the daily support of my family. They would leave cute notes or funny drawings of the 'Incredible Shrinking Woman' on our home dry erase board. My husband stepped up and took over my traditional home responsibilities and let me pursue the Challenge."

By the end of the six months, Tracey lost 125 pounds and reduced her body age from 51 to her actual age of 41. Tracey's team won the challenge.

"To me, it wasn't about winning. It was knowing for once in my life, I had not given up on myself. I let no excuses get in my way. I saw how proud my family was of me. I don't know any other time in my life when I felt that. It was awesome."

Now, three years later, Tracey is employed at the Y. She is a wellness coach, group fitness instructor and has certifications in Zumba 1 & 2 and Zumba Gold.

"I have lost another 19 pounds by continuing to take care of myself and living a healthier lifestyle. I am very passionate about helping people get past the excuses and getting up and active. The best compliment I receive is when I have known someone for many of my 'fat' years and they pass me by because they can't recognize me for who I am today."

Continued from **PAGE 5**

"The Y provided me with necessary trainings and education to teach, coach and train others in aquatics. What began as a part-time job, after school, quickly had me looking at my future with the Y." One moment stands out for Kelly as she realized that being a lifeguard was not a job, but an important piece of her life.

"I recall completing progress reports for the 150 youth that I had for swim instruction. I became overwhelmed at the thought of the opportunity I had to impact these kids' lives beyond what they learned in my class. These kids knew me, Miss Kelly, and I knew them. Seeing kids return to the Y now because the Y made a difference in their life is rewarding. You think, they have a skill now that they didn't have before and I was part of it."

Kelly recalls unforgettable adult mentors at the Y that demonstrated everyday how team work, communication and the Y values are key to success. "The Y values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility played a large role in my position as the ideal lifeguard, swim instructor or aquatics director. I was now living the Y mission and had adopted the Y-way into my own life."

"I wanted to share my story because as most teenagers know, it is sometimes hard to feel like you belong. But, I did find belonging, fun and friendship at the Y. Now with two children and a family of my own, I look forward to seeing how the Y will evolve in our lives."

Jonathan and son Benjamin

Time with family is precious and in short supply for many these days. Both parents' and kids' schedules can be so crammed with activities and obligations, often little time or energy is left over for just being together and having fun.

Most weekday mornings before school, Jonathan brings his first grade son Benjamin to the Y for 10 to 20 minutes of basketball, racquetball, tossing the football, or any number of other forms of sports play, depending on their mood. It's an easy morning stop for the pair. The Y is on the way to school, plus stopping at the Y can be a great motivator for getting out the door and off to school on hectic mornings.

When asked how this all began, and what inspired him to get Ben's day started with exercise and father-son time, Jonathan says: "We started doing this when I opened my law practice a year or so ago. I don't have a commute every morning; I have extra time in the mornings." Jonathan also noted that he saw this as a way to establish a pattern of regular daily exercise in Ben's life. "He'll just grow up with this as part of his daily routine," says Jonathan. "Plus, we start the day by having fun together."

Jonathan started coming to the Y when he was a youngster, and like so many generational members, also spent time with his family here while growing up. The Y is a part of Jonathan's family history, and now it's a part of Ben's too.

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Build something good today

Across Erie County, the Y helps people give back and assist our neighbors by offering them opportunities to volunteer, advocate and support programs that strengthen community. At the Y, we are a volunteer-founded, volunteer-led organization. Volunteers are found at every level of the Y – in child care, health & wellness, youth mentoring, board leadership and more. Through the Y's community support campaign We Build People, the Y provides financial assistance and income-based membership rates so that everyone can benefit from Y programs and membership. Additionally, the Y partners with other area nonprofits enabling our members to support the community through donations and volunteerism.

Jean Thompson and her son Tye

Jean wrote the Y a letter.

Jean is a single mom who works 40 to 48 hours per week. Her son, Tye, is 2 years old and attends early learning care at the Eastside Y.

"He gets so excited in the morning when I tell him that its time to go to the Y to play with all the kids. Everybody is so wonderful and caring there," says Jean.

At the time Jean wrote the letter, she was on a waiting list for financial assistance to help her pay for child care through the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. She also qualified for financial assistance through the Y's support campaign We Build People. Without the financial assistance from the State, Jean could not afford care.

"I had saved some money from my income tax returns in case something like this happened so that I could afford care for my son until I was taken off the waiting list. The problem I was having is that my savings is almost depleted and I'm still on the waiting list at the State," says Jean. "Even with help from the Y, I am paying $145 a week, which, after bills, only leaves me $40 a week for groceries, clothing for my son and any other problems that are just a part of life."

To help Jean, the Y extended an additional scholarship so that her son could remain in the Y's program until she was taken off the State waiting list. That was July 2010.

Tye remains in the arms of the caring Y staff.

Brenda Moski

Like most women today, Brenda wears many hats: a mother, wife, friend, co-worker and Y volunteer. She is described by those that know her best as caring, hardworking, loyal and self confident.

Ask any of the early morning group exercise crowd at the Glenwood Park Y and they will tell you that the list of roles and qualities above must be for Brenda.

Brenda is a wonderful example of a person who is like many of our Y members. She first got involved with the Y years ago with her children. She did the "Swim & Gym" circuit with her family. Flash forward 20 years, when Brenda received an anniversary gift that would change her life — a Y membership.

On a dark, early morning Brenda, who considered her self to be a "back seat girl who never wanted to be in front," sneaked into the farthest corner of an early morning X-Bike class. Another day, then another, and yet another until she had her back seat on that ▸

bike saddle six days a week.

Brenda could see changes happening. She saw a change not only in her body, but in her mind and spirit. She started to move forward in saddle seats … and confidence. She began to mentor with the early morning teachers and became a certified YMCA of the USA Cycling Instructor.

Brenda is now supporting and encouraging people as a Y volunteer. The back seat girl felt the desire to give back to the place that put her cycling wheels into action.

She reminds people that "The Y may have a multitude of machines for you to use, but it's the Y mission that sets it apart." Her life has been touched and now she is passing it on. It's the Y Way!

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Jeff Craft

A service organization that provides enrichment and development into peoples lives often faces a difficult dilemma: how to measure and quantify impact? It's not an accounting that provides cut and dried outcomes but more often something that can devolve into a 'nature vs. nurture' discussion. Yet time and again, at least a thread of positive direction in someone's life comes from a story that is told through the YMCA. Jeff Craft has a story like that.

Jeff grew up in Oil City, one of five children and has fond early memories of sitting in the living room with his father watching boxing matches. "I always loved boxing," he says. "It was something my dad and I enjoyed watching together and there were great fighters then, Ali, Frazier, Larry Holmes."

Those fighters are gone and sadly Jeff's father was soon gone too, his parents divorcing when Jeff was just 10 years old. "That was a tough time obviously," he says, "and here was my mom, a single mother, working and raising five kids. I wasn't a bad kid but there wasn't a lot of supervision in my life then so I was hanging out with my buddies and things could have gone bad for sure."

One of the good moves his mom made was to go to the Oil City YMCA. "I don't remember exactly how we got the membership but we had very little money and I know it was a scholarship membership of some kind."

Over the years, YMCAs across the country have always believed that no one should ever be denied services for financial reasons. The YMCA of Greater Erie supports that very mission with their We Build People campaign and it is just such a program that led Jeff Craft to his first involvement with the YMCA.

It was on one of his very first visits that an old memory was stirred. While walking through the Y one evening, he heard the thumping of leather making impact. He peered into a workout room and saw an older man working with two young men wearing boxing gloves. They were hitting the heavy bag, rhythmically swatting the speed bag, jumping rope. It was boxing. He was just 14 and in a new place but Jeff felt at home.

"I watched for awhile and then the older man told me to come in and join them." The man's name was George Ryan, a gas company worker by day, a Y volunteer in the evening.

"He was such a nice man," Jeff recalls. "He could see I liked the sport and was very patient." Jeff became not just a regular but an avid and willing pupil of George Ryan's coaching. The two young men that had first drawn Jeff's attention faded away but Jeff thrived on the training and discipline. Every day immediately following school, Jeff went straight to the YMCA. Boxing was two hours daily, 4 to 6 p.m. and Jeff stayed at the Y until closing time at 10 p.m., even getting a part-time job as a supervisor of the game room.

"I didn't think about it at the time but yeah, I guess I was looking for some structure. George was very good about discipline without being heavy about it."

As Jeff's training continued George guided him through a number of local competitions. Oil City was one of the very few Y's that had boxing programs but in the 1980s there were a number of regional youth boxing clubs offering local competitions. The Y's philosophy was then as it is now, that participating, taking part and being active is more important than focusing on winning alone but as it happened, Jeff also won very often.

"When I boxed, I never had the killer instinct or felt I had to win," Jeff says. "I just remember thinking I didn't want to disappoint George. Sometimes after school I wouldn't always feel like going to train but then I'd think that George would be disappointed so I'd go and later be glad I did."

The skill part of boxing, Jeff clearly got. His wins continued to pile up until in 1985 at the age of 18, he won his weight class in the Pennsylvania Gold Gloves competition, at the time the highest amateur level attainable. But that is a measurable outcome. It was the more internal learning of discipline, the structure and guidance provided by a mentor at the YMCA that has had a far greater impact on Jeff Craft. From a young teen that could have roamed the streets heading to an unknown and unfocused future, the thread of the YMCA led Jeff Craft to a maturing development, a healthy life and social responsibility.

And maybe that outcome can be measured too. Now 44, Jeff Craft has been more properly titled since 1998, chief of police of the Edinboro Police Department. And the YMCA is still a big part of his life. He joined the County YMCA the very first year it opened in 1999 because, "It's a different feeling at the Y. I belonged to another health club for awhile but there is something more community based, a little different, a little special about belonging to the Y and I like that."

For Jeff Craft, it is a feeling beyond measure.

WMF wishes to extend our heartfelt appreciation to the YMCA of Greater Erie for their unwavering commitment to our community...

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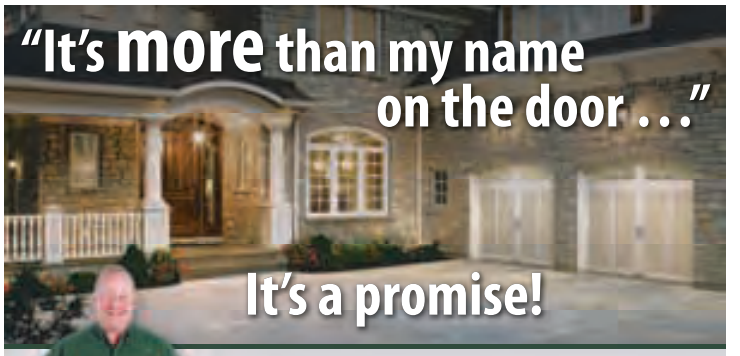

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