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Delta HOPE Promotes Healthy Lifestyles

The OrganWise Guys help teach children the basics of human physiology and how the body responds to different foods and lifestyles. They feature characters (front row, from left) Peri Stolic, the intestines; Hardy Heart; the Kidney Brothers; Madame Muscle; Windy, the lungs; (back row, from left) Luigi Liver, Peter Pancreas and Calci M. Bone. Together with two additional characters—Sir Rebrum, the brain, and Pepto, the stomach—they teach children four rules for healthy living: low fat, high fiber, lots of water and exercise.

By Linda Breazeale

Obesity is no small problem for Mississippians, and a program under way in the Delta addresses it by promoting healthy lifestyles among the state's youngest residents: school children.

Mississippi State University Extension Service is partnering with its sister organizations in Louisiana and Arkansas for the program known as Delta HOPE—Healthy Options for People through Extension. Funded by a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant, the program involves educational efforts and evaluation in the Delta region by Extension agents from the three states.

"Obesity is easier to prevent than to treat," said Deborah Little, program coordinator for Mississippi. "If we are going to make a difference, we need to reach the children before they develop unhealthy habits."

Little is the curriculum and evaluation manager for the Extension Family and Nutrition Program at MSU. She said the program is an organized effort to help teachers incorporate nutrition and exercise curriculum in the classroom.

Photos by Marco Nicovich

"Teachers don't want or need another thing to do in their classrooms, but this curriculum encourages them to incorporate exercise into their regular lessons," Little said. "For example, children may do jumping jacks or march in place while they work on their spelling or math lessons." The program combines existing curricula called *Take 10!* and *The OrganWise Guys* to focus on physical activity and nutrition. By incorporating 10 minutes of exercise three times a week, children receive an extra 30 minutes of exercise they normally would not have received. Additionally, Little said research shows an active curriculum helps students stay on task.

After 26 years of teaching, Gwen Pettis knows what works for kindergarten children, and what does not.

"The activities actually help kids focus. The curriculum reinforces learning skills. We use chants as we move to help us count, recite information and practice beginning sounds," Pettis said. "The children get excited when it's time for *Take 10!*. It's a great way to remind ourselves to exercise. Still, some children get tired after just 10 minutes."

Pettis appreciates anything that encourages physical activity at Batesville Elementary School.

"Currently, we do not have a physical education teacher, and recess is mostly free play," Pettis said. "Students need physical activities in a structured setting."

Pettis receives help from a cast of 10 characters, including Hardy Heart; Windy, the lungs; and the Kidney Brothers. Originally created apart from the *Take 10!* health curriculum, *The OrganWise Guys* help teach the basics of human physiology and how the body's response to different foods and lifestyles.

Dr. Michelle Lombardo of Duluth, Ga., created the characters and said *The OrganWise Guys* are ideal for communicating health issues, inciting behavior change and enlivening the education process for any age group. The health material with the *OrganWise* program targets every age groups from ages 3 through senior adults.

Lombardo said this concept for teaching children was born out of adult health sessions she led as a health professional in the early 1990s. When adults learned that their health problems were 20 to 30 years in the making, they requested ways to help children make better choices to prevent future trouble.

"We want to help kids take responsibility for their choices and learn why certain choices are good or bad for their health," Lombardo said. "Every child learns the four rules of *The OrganWise Guys*: low fat, high fiber, lots of water and exercise."

"The Extension agents are essential in promoting this curriculum and making sure that the material is used," she said. "After one teacher in a school begins using the program, it's usually contagious because of how user-friendly the material is and how well it complements the existing objectives."



These Little Organ Annie dolls help teach children that people look alike on the inside. Each doll opens to reveal The OrganWise Guys, 10 characters that help teach the basics of human physiology and how the body responds to different foods and lifestyles. Representatives of Mississippi State University's Extension Service said these dolls are ideal for communicating health issues, inciting behavior change and enlivening the education process for any age group.