Pedaling for Parkinson’s is Improving Lives

Over the past several decades, clinicians and researchers have begun to understand the potential of exercise in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease (PD). Dr. Jay Alberts of the Cleveland Clinic has dedicated a substantial portion of his career to helping people with PD improve their quality of life through aerobic exercise.

Dr. Alberts has conducted multiple clinical trials demonstrating that an 8-week bout of high intensity aerobic exercise delivered on a stationary bike can reduce motor symptoms of the disease by 35%. The symptom reduction following aerobic exercise gives rise to the possibility that aerobic exercise may alter the course of the disease – a novel finding that has the potential to challenge and redefine the way the PD community views exercise in the treatment of PD.

As a result of his laboratory studies, Dr. Alberts founded Pedaling for Parkinson’s (PFP), a non-profit committed to promoting community-based exercise programs for individuals with PD. The PFP classes are typically conducted 3x/week, year-round and focus on high-intensity cycling. Currently, there are over 100 PFP classes in YMCAs and community centers throughout the United States and several international sites. The Whatcom Family YMCA has one of the largest PFP programs in the United States.

After more than a decade of fielding emails and calls from patients indicating the PFP programs are beneficial, Dr. Alberts and his colleague, Dr. Anson Rosenfeldt, decided it was time to systematically study the effects of these PFP programs. Dr. Rosenfeldt is leading the project to examine the effect of real-world aerobic exercise by monitoring individuals with PD during their PFP cycling classes at four different PFP locations throughout the United States.

The Whatcom YMCA was asked to be a partner for the project due to its large class size and highly engaged staff and participants. Motor and non-motor symptoms, as well as cadence (pedaling rate) and heart rate from the cycling classes, will be tracked for a 12-month period. This study has the potential to answer many questions about the long-term effects of aerobic exercise in PD. Those who participate are donating their time and effort toward finding answers to a disease that affects millions of individuals worldwide.
The Columbia Elementary Girls on the Run team hosted a bake sale that raised over $215 for Seattle Children’s Hospital.

GIRLS ON THE RUN GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY
Girls on the Run helps girls grow confidence through accomplishment. Along with all of the lessons about life skills taught through running games, they have two bigger goals. One, of course, is for each girl to train for and run a 5K with her team and all the other teams throughout Whatcom County at the end of the season.

The other big goal is to collaborate with her teammates to plan and implement a Community Impact Project. Each team of girls brainstorms the different communities that they belong to. They discuss ideas for how they can show gratitude to their community, and eventually they come to a consensus. The girls plan, divvy-up duties and execute the project together.

The Skyline GOTR team decided to visit an assisted living facility in Ferndale. They gathered up some fun picture books and simple board games to play with the residents. The two generations spent the afternoon huddled in small groups, swapping stories and laughter.

Several teams organized supply drives at their schools to support the homeless animals at Whatcom Humane Society. Did you know that the WHS has an animal food bank? This is for folks who barely have the funds to buy their own meals, let alone kibble for their pets. Our girls delivered many, many pounds of cat and dog food to the food bank, along with towels, blankets and toys for the animal residents of the shelter waiting for their forever homes.

In recent years our girls have had bake sales, car washes, and other fundraisers to donate funds to organizations such as the Hospice House, Children’s Hospital, Lydia Place, Lighthouse Mission and Skookum Kids, to name a few.

The girls learn that their little ol’ selves have the power to make a positive impact in our community with just a little effort and a lot of teamwork.

“I like the way Girls on the Run keeps me healthy. I can run longer now. I want to do GOTR again!”

-Lummi Nation School Girls on the Run participant

CONFIDENCE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS
For one girl on our Girls on the Run team, a noticeable difference was evident. She has had many issues regarding her behavior in the classroom. She gets angry easily and has had difficulty making friends. She came to GOTR in boots, she had no running shoes. She would set her running goal at a very high number and usually attained it. Throughout her runs she would have a smile on her face. We even were able to get her a pair of running shoes!

-Coach of Lummi Nation School Girls on the Run
THANK YOU

In 2018, the community, foundations, corporations, and Y board members and staff gave generously to the Whatcom Family YMCA to ensure we can continue improving lives by providing services and programs to all, regardless of one’s financial resources. These gifts and grants helped subsidize programs and provided over $502,000 in financial assistance to local youth and families. We are honored to recognize and extend our sincere gratitude to the following individuals and organizations for their leadership investments in the Y.

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YMCA’s Youth Institute
Creating a Brighter Future

“Youth Institute helps us become new, skilled people—people we are proud of.” This is just one of the many positive sentiments shared by teens in the Whatcom Family YMCA’s new college- and career-readiness program, Youth Institute. Having been established and operated successfully for 17 years at the YMCA of Greater Long Beach, CA, Youth Institute is now spreading across the country, including to teens in our own Whatcom County community.

This free, year-round program focuses on serving teens in need of academic or emotional support and helps them build character, develop life skills, and master technology to prepare them for the road ahead. Low-income youth, those falling behind in school, and those with no summer plans or opportunities are given preference in the application process. Each day of the summer portion of the program, Youth Institute exposes students to new locations, opportunities, and people in their community. It kicks off with a week-long wilderness retreat, followed by 6 weeks of technology- and character-focused programming. Thanks to key partnerships with several local institutions (Bellingham Technical College, Bellingham Makerspace, and East Whatcom Regional Resource Center), participants gain valuable hands-on experience.

This past August, our inaugural class of ten Youth Institute participants graduated. Supported by their families and Y staff, the teens presented their video productions, which they created over the summer, at graduation. Each also received $500 as a reward for successfully completing the program. This incentive encouraged participants to remain active and engaged and provided them, and their families, with money to pay for school year expenses such as clothes and supplies.

Though the program’s summer end date coincides with graduation, Youth Institute continues to meet year-round twice a month throughout the school year. This gives participants the opportunity to stay in touch with friends and have mentors help them with difficult homework, emotional life challenges, college preparation, and/ or job searching.

In October, Youth Institute addressed the topic of professionalism in anticipation of applying for their first jobs. The teens learned how to write a resume, dress professionally, and successfully interview. Thanks to the generosity of WiseBuys, Lydia Place’s thrift store downtown, our teens were given an opportunity to find their own professional style. WiseBuys invited Youth Institute participants to spend a couple hours shopping when the store was closed to the public. Later, the teens used their new professional outfits to participate in a mock interview conducted by department directors from our YMCA. It was an intimidating process, the teens said, but better to practice now than to wing it when a real job is on the line!

November also brought a new opportunity for our Youth Institute — horse therapy! NW Hearts United, an equine facilitation organization that focuses on trauma-informed care, kindly invited our teens out to their stables. There, our teens learned how to feel the energy of other living beings, overcome their fears of things more powerful than them, and how to use non-verbal communication to lead others. Some participants were nervous at first, but by the end, everyone had made a visible connection with their horses and were able to relate that connection to their personal lives. It was truly a beautiful experience!

As the teens continue with the program, they will become eligible for a position as a youth mentor for the next year’s cohort of participants. Teens who continually participate as a youth mentor will be eligible to receive a $1,000 college scholarship at the end of their senior year of high school.

There is no doubt Youth Institute’s focused approach is likely to be life-changing and have a profound impact on the trajectory of these young peoples’ lives. As one participant shared, this new program is already succeeding in engaging kids and keeping them on the right path. “I want to accomplish something in my life, and this program will help me learn skills to do it.”

“I want to accomplish something in my life, and this program will help me learn skills to do it.”

-YI participant
In the summer of 2018, the Whatcom Family YMCA launched their first 16-week session of Enhance®Fitness. Enhance®Fitness is a functional fitness class designed specifically for people with arthritis. The class was developed in Seattle, and the Whatcom Family YMCA offers it to the residents of Eleanor Apartments, who can not make it to the Y for a variety of reasons.

At the start and end of each 16-week session, participants are asked to complete 3 fitness tests to assess functional fitness. When the tests were completed, every participant showed improvements in at least one, if not more, of the tests. When asked what they like best about the class, many of the participants said “the classes encourage them to get out of their apartments”, and “they like the friendships they have developed with other participants while they improve their health”.

Over the holidays, one of the participants told us her family was excited seeing her being able to move without the help of her walker, and another participant shared how she surprised her adult son during his visit, showing off how she could now go up and down 3 flights of stairs.