

Aiming For A 'Wellness Zone'

BY VIRGINIA GARRISON

It's a friendly takeover.

Now in its seventh year, the Wellness Foundation is well on its way to creating what Jennifer Taylor, the foundation's executive director, calls "a wellness zone" in East Hampton Town "so that eating healthy and being healthy is as easy as possible." The mission is to empower people "on their journey to increased health and happiness" through good nutrition, exercise and stress management, she said.

So far, the foundation has reached more than 3,000 kids and 3,000 adults, from preschoolers to 93-year-olds, through Wellness Challenges, which focus on a plant-based diet, and Healthy Food for Life in-school programs, which teach kids to be "food detectives" when it comes to ingredients and to try even such things as "green smoothies" made with kale.

The foundation has made forays into public schools in East Hampton, Amagansett, Springs and Montauk, infiltrating the refrigerators of local families and changing the eating habits of teachers and administrators as well. An incursion into Sag Harbor is planned this fall.

Over the past winter, a six-week Wellness Challenge that the foundation offers to adults in five locations collectively eliminated 800 pounds and 164 waistline inches as well as, individually, an average of 33 cholesterol points. This spring's challenges filled quickly, and there is a several-page waiting list for the next one, which begins in October.

The growing number of re-energized "ambassadors of wellness" who have completed the challenge has prompted at least 25 restaurants and take-out places from Montauk to Hampton Bays to offer Wellness-Challenge-approved food choices marked with a "W" and in some cases accompanied by discounts. The foundation's potluck dinners, to which participants bring vegan-friendly dishes and recipes to share, typically attract about 70 to 80 people each month, Ms. Taylor said.

"It's what Doug envisioned," she said of Douglas Mercer, the foundation's president and benefactor. "But we're pinching ourselves."

"It blows our minds," Ms. Tay-



Jennifer Taylor with a Wellness Challenge lunch choice at the Golden Pear in East Hampton.

KYRIL BROMLEY

lor said. "It's like the little Wellness Foundation that could. ... It speaks to what's happening on a national level."

For the first time ever, the foundation is holding a summer benefit—on Saturday, June 30, from 6 to 8 p.m. at a private home in East Hampton Village with a view of Hook Pond. Vegan hors d'oeuvres from the Art of Eating, cocktails and music have been promised, as well as a tribute to the Wellness Foundation's advisory council and a special guest, Kathy Freston, a wellness expert and author of "The Lean," who's appeared on the Oprah and Dr. Oz TV shows.

Ms. Freston advises people to swap out something in their repertoire each week for something healthier—whole grains or an apple a day, say—to make it easier to build to cumulative health improvements.

"We don't want to create a Stepford town of vegans," Ms. Taylor explained. "I'm a foodie. I don't want to eat food that tastes and looks like cardboard."

To that end, the foundation also sponsors Happy Healthy Families, in which families learn how to incorporate more whole foods into daily meals. Ms. Taylor said it was "like the most crazy version of 'Kids' Top Chef'" with 60 kids making six meals in under an hour at six different stations. "It's so much fun," she said.

Parents might be dubious about their kids eating something like a healthy taco with beans and 10 vegetables, Ms. Taylor said, but she advises them not to say a word and let peer pres-

sure take its course: "While your friends are doing it, you're doing it."

Even for the adults, she said, there's supposed to be some fun and grace. "It doesn't have to be: Welcome to the Wellness Challenge. Every food you love you've got to leave it at the door," Ms. Taylor said. "For six weeks, you give your body a chance to do some healing," she said. "Most people feel so much better."

Annemarie Brown, a teacher, used to run away from Ms. Taylor, the latter said, whenever they ran into each other at the East Hampton Middle School. Eventually, along with a slew of teachers at the John Marshall Elementary School who got interested through their students' Healthy Food for Life lessons, Ms. Brown went ahead and took the Challenge, graduating in March.

She'd hoped to lose 10 pounds. She lost 26 instead and knocked her cholesterol down 100 points, later telling Ms. Taylor she could not believe how easy it was.

In the schools, the earlier you can get to the kids the better, Ms. Taylor said.

Exercise and stress management also are addressed both in the schools and during the challenge, with adults getting pedometers and being asked to take at least 10,000 steps per day, and with everyone being introduced to stress management techniques such as yoga, meditation and acupuncture.

"If any one of these pieces are missing, a person gets out of balance," said Ms. Taylor. Her own

"wellness journey" evolved over a decade ago, as she moved from away from health problems in her 20s to working for almost 10 years with Marilu Henner, who wrote "Total Health Make-over," which advocates a 30-day plan without dairy or meat. She also worked in geriatric care and doing wellness counseling.

"If I'm going to live to be 100, I want to be healthy," Ms. Taylor said, whose practice of exercise, stress management and good nutrition allowed her to manage migraines and avoid surgery, she said.

In her experience working at nursing homes, Ms. Taylor said, the problems of long-term type-two diabetes—the need for dialysis, for instance—might typically evolve in patients between the ages of 65 and 80. However, what has traditionally been called "adult onset" type-two diabetes now is beginning to show up in young children, so much so that two of three African-American children, and one of three Caucasian children, born in 2000 are expected to have the condition by the age of 18.

"Are they going to be 30 when that stuff starts to happen?" Ms. Taylor asked. "I don't want my kids in third grade to have heart disease or diabetes when they're 30."

There are predictions that today's children will have a shorter life span than their parents, but Ms. Taylor emphasized that the prediction is predicated on there being no change in current lifestyle trends. "We are determined to make that change," she said of herself, the foundation and her students, who call themselves "the generation of change."

"The younger we get them, the better," she said, explaining that in the East Hampton preschool program she noticed that many children couldn't name the fruits and vegetables. The little ones learn quickly, she said: "If it's white, don't take a bite," and if sugar's in the first three ingredients, "it's dessert."

"If you ask any kid in Food For Life what saturated fat does, they all say the same thing with the same enunciation," she said—"STICKS."

"You're here for a reason," she tells her students. "You have to take care of yourself so you can be that."