

Wellness Booster Takes Aim at Staying Fit

Foundation educates families on nutrition

By Carissa Katz

East Hampton, NY February 1, 2007 - Plenty of people reach a point where they decide to make healthy food and exercise important parts of their lives. For Doug Mercer, 72, who founded the East Hampton-based Nutrition for Wellness Foundation in 2005, eating well and staying fit are almost a religion.

He had always been active and athletic, but about a decade ago, he said, "I realized I was moving on in age." If he wanted to continue doing the things he loved to do, he felt he needed to make some changes so that the later part of his life could be as fulfilling as his earlier years. "I wrote a very personal letter to my M.D. in New York and wanted his help in a preventative program going forward."

His doctor never replied.

"That woke me up to the fact that if I was going to do anything I was going to have to do it on my own." So Mr. Mercer, who had recently retired from a successful career in the shipping business, went forward with gusto.

After reading in a newspaper about an Austin, Tex., healing clinic called the Optimum Health Institute, he signed up for an eight-day program. Purifying and detoxifying the body through "fasting, diet, cleansing, and exercise," are a part of the institute's programs. "My initial interest was in the detoxifying aspects of what they were talking about," Mr. Mercer said on Monday, at the Nutrition for Wellness Foundation's office on Dunemere Lane.

He came away with a profound appreciation for the human body and how it works, and a "tremendous knowledge of the importance of nutrition," he said. At the end of those eight days, he had made some life-changing decisions. He gave up alcohol, dairy products, and refined sugar (except for the occasional birthday cake). He cut back on the amount of animal products in his diet and began to eat more fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, and seeds. He began to read everything he could find on nutrition and wellness. The more he learned, the more he was convinced that the information should be shared, and his own experience had shown him that physicians could not always be relied on for that kind of support.

"The American population is in an extraordinary dilemma," Mr. Mercer said. "On the one hand, we have an extraordinarily capable medical system, but it is virtually all pharmaceutically and surgically based. There is no prevention quotient there. From an acute-illness point of view, it's fantastic. If you have a bacterial infection, break an ankle, or you're in an accident, it's the best in the world." On the other hand, if you want to prevent disease through diet or cure chronic illnesses, it falls short, he said. "They're treating the symptoms rather than the causes of chronic



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The Nutrition for Wellness Foundation promotes a high-nutrient, low-calorie diet focused on whole, natural plant foods as a key to lasting good health, said its founder, Doug Mercer, and executive director, Jennifer Taylor.

illnesses.”

Consumers have every right to be confused, he said. Between the food industry, the latest diet crazes, and nutritional supplements, it's hard to know what information to trust. The food industry is in the business of sales, he said. “It's all about efficiencies and productivity.” That might make for a larger profit for the companies, but, in Mr. Mercer's mind, it also makes food less healthful. “They're deluging us with all of this stuff which is not good for us.”

The country is in the midst of “a national health crisis, that is unprecedented,” he said, pointing to the rise in childhood obesity and diabetes. “There are pockets of wellness, but over all, the situation is extremely serious.”

When he came across “Eat to Live,” a book by Dr. Joel Fuhrman, he felt he had finally found a guide for putting his beliefs into action. Dr. Fuhrman, a family practitioner in New Jersey, focuses on helping people address their illnesses primarily through nutrition. He sees “patients with chronic or degenerative diseases that standard medical practitioners haven't been able to help,” Mr. Mercer said. “In many cases people come to him as a last resort.” Surprisingly, the whole idea of tackling illness through nutrition, especially in the way Dr. Fuhrman recommends, is relatively new in the medical profession.

Mr. Mercer was soon starting to think not only about helping himself lead a better life, but about helping the community get healthier. “In the winter of 2005, I did some major soul-searching as to what I was going to do with the last quarter of my life,” he said. At East Hampton Middle School, Ginny Reale, the health teacher, and Barbara Tracey, the school nurse, had started the Bonac on Board to Wellness program to teach children about nutrition, exercise, and other health matters. Before long, students were demanding healthier lunch alternatives. Mr. Mercer read an article about their protests and was inspired.

He got involved in the Bonac on Board program and, that summer, formed the Nutrition for Wellness Foundation, which he runs out of an office above his garage, overlooking the Maidstone Club's golf course. Its directors are Anthony Gerard of East Hampton and New York City, Leasa Mayer of Seattle, and Michael Worthen of San Diego. Jennifer Taylor is its executive director.

Mr. Mercer was so impressed with Dr. Fuhrman's book that he eventually made a medical appointment at his office to talk with him about working on his nutrition and wellness initiative in East Hampton. Dr. Fuhrman became the foundation's chairman of nutritional excellence.

Working with the Bonac on Board program and the Y.M.C.A. East Hampton RECenter, the foundation has sponsored a number of free nutritional seminars for the community. The most recent one, in September, featured Dr. T. Colin Powell, the author of “The China Study,” and drew a crowd of more than 400 people to the East Hampton Middle School auditorium. “The China Study” is based on a nutritional study that found a correlation between the percentage of animal protein in Chinese diets and the development of cancer. Dr. Campbell and Dr. Fuhrman both recommend a high-nutrient, low-calorie diet focused primarily on whole, natural plant foods.

On Feb. 10, Dr. Fuhrman, who has given other programs in East Hampton with the foundation, will return to run two seminars on healthy eating for families. His program will pick up where Dr. Campbell's left off, Mr. Mercer said. At two identical sessions, one from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. and one from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m., Dr. Fuhrman will talk about his scientifically based formula for “achieving optimal health.”

“It's a proven program that can prevent illness and cure chronic illness,” Mr. Mercer claimed. “The physicians or clinics that advocate this program are having extraordinary successes. The results are proving that it does work.”

The free seminars on Feb. 10 will be open to adults and children over 10. Babysitting will be provided for younger children. Reservations are required through the Nutrition for Wellness

Foundation.

In addition to special presentations like this, the foundation also collaborates with Bonac on Board and the RECenter on the Wellness Circle, weekly meetings that provide a support system for people trying to change their eating habits and “move forward with personal wellness plans.”

“Making changes in one’s life is not easy,” Mr. Mercer said. “We’re all creatures of habit. Food can be addictive.” And change can be hard on family and friends.

“All different kinds of people come to the groups,” said Ms. Taylor. “A lot of moms are worried about how to feed their kids healthily. Cholesterol is a big concern, diabetes, reversing heart disease. And a lot of people just want to know how to live a long, quality-filled life.” Sometimes the circles include guest speakers and cooking classes. Like the seminars the foundation co-sponsors, the Wellness Circles are free. There are meetings in the middle school library on Mondays and Tuesdays from 7 to 8 p.m. and at the same time on Wednesdays at the Montauk School. A new circle is forming for mothers.

The foundation’s goal, Mr. Mercer said, is to make East Hampton “a role model for wellness for other communities to follow. . . . In focusing here, we really can make a difference.” So far, “the program has really exceeded my expectations.”

“I always like working hard. I did a very good job in my years in the shipping business, but my passion is in this,” Mr. Mercer said.