

Village Park Residents on a Mission

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By Casey Rees

At the outset of summer, the Village Park walkers, a group of 25 determined senior citizens based out of the Village Park Enrichment Center in Valparaiso, set a goal for themselves. They wanted to walk a distance equivalent to the gap between Valparaiso and California by summer's end.



Armed with pedometers – a device that counts steps – the group, whose members are 60 years of age and older, hit the streets. Not only did they reach their goal of collectively walking 2,366 miles in roughly 3 months, many have decided to make the journey back.

Before they began their walking program, many in the group were unaware of how much they already exercised during the course of the day.

Jill Pfister, program director for the Village Park Enrichment Center and creator of the Village Park walker program, remembered one particular member of the group who had never had the opportunity to participate in a walking program before.

“I told her ‘Just put [the pedometer] on your belt when you get up in the morning, and when you sit down for the last time at night, take it off and write down how many steps you had,’” Pfister said. “She was amazed at how far she’d actually walked.”

These positive results encouraged the walkers, and motivated them to walk more each day. The walking program serves both as a motivator and as a convenient way to exercise.

Pfister said there were walking programs at the center before where members would walk around the track at the Butterfield Pavillion in Valparaiso, but it was nothing like what the group does today.

“What I found with our particular group, with appointments and other events, people don’t always have time to get together as a group and go walking,” Pfister said. “I wanted to show them that they already exercise on a regular basis anyway. It’s not going to take extra effort to go someplace and meet.”

So that was the foundation for the Village Park walkers program. People could stay active and exercise all the time without the restrictions structured activities can sometimes create. With this foundation in place, Pfister could realize her main goal of improving the physical and mental health of seniors in the program.

“Someone who maybe had a mobility issue, maybe a little strength issue, or stamina issue ... they have gained strength,” Pfister said. “They have gained stamina and their mobility has improved in some ways. It’s actually made them feel mentally, a lot better.”

Upon reaching their goal of 2,366 miles, some in the group still were not satisfied. So of the 25 who started, 15 decided to “turn around” and come back. They divided themselves into two teams – red team and green team – and are currently racing home. The green team holds the lead with 542 miles to the red team’s 520, but it is still anybody’s race.

Much of green teams success can be attributed to one determined walker. Jeanne Ebling-Laing, of Valparaiso, sits atop the leader board with 658 miles walked thus far, which includes both trips there and back.

“[The program] keeps me motivated,” she said, while gazing up at a map of the United States that had the trip from Valparaiso to California and back outlined on it.

“I walk in the YMCA three or four times a week. I get three miles in there besides all the other running around I do.”

On the wall adjacent to the map there are two large charts tracking each individual’s progress, where Ebling-Laing’s name rests at the top, more than doubling the figures of the runner-up.

The Village park walkers are not alone in their fondness for walking to exercise. Walking is the most popular form of exercise in the United States and according to recent studies more than 70 million Americans walk to exercise. For many it is the cheapest, safest and easiest way to get the blood flowing.

The Village Park walkers program is not the only activity being offered at the center, formerly the Banta Activity Center. They offer bus trips, exercise classes, bingo, line dancing, billiards, educational programs and much more. For more information on the Village Park Enrichment Center, located at 605 Beech Street in Valparaiso, call 219-462-1301, or visit www.valparaisoparks.org/banta/banta.htm.