

## **Episode 64: Wanda's Story: "It's a Game Changer."**

### **After Thinking it's Too Late to Change, a Program Made Wanda Stop, Think & Reset.**

We revisit our Operation Change series with a trip to Hazard, Kentucky. Wanda initially thought an 18-week health education program was a huge time commitment, and that maybe it was too late to make changes. What she found was a program that motivated her to redefine her life and priorities, find new purpose, discover a new sense of community, and her health improving in some surprising ways. Hosted by Dr. Rose Gonzalez. Posted on September 16, 2020.

Dr. Gonzalez: Hello and welcome to this edition of the Health Disparities Podcast.

I'm Dr. Rose Gonzalez, a nurse member of the Executive Steering Committee of the Movement is Life Caucus. Movement is Life is a multidisciplinary coalition seeking to eliminate disparities in muscle and joint health by promoting physical mobility to improve the quality of life. I will serve as your host for today's podcast. I'm so excited that I'm joined by a participant of our Operation Change Program in Hazard, Kentucky.

Hello, Wanda, how are you?

Wanda: I'm wonderful. How are you?

Dr. Gonzalez: I'm great. So, we're going to have a little conversation about your experience with Operation Change. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Wanda: My name is Wanda. I am 54, almost 55 years old. I am an Eastern Kentucky girl, born and raised. I worked in the education system for 27 years, retired in 2015. I went to work part-time for one of my former students. It pays to be good to your former students.

Dr. Gonzalez: Yes, it does.

Wanda: In local government. Of course, right now, thanks to COVID. I am furloughed and doing a little bit of work from home.

Dr. Gonzalez: I'm kind of interested in how you first heard about Operation Change.

Wanda: Actually, I received an email from a friend of mine, and it was a flyer about Operation Change. I read the flyer and was very, interested. Then, I contacted them, got a little more information, talked to a few of my friends in the same age range about it, and several expressed interest. Only one of them ended up coming with me, but we were both glad that we did.

Dr. Gonzalez: If you could remember that time because it was almost a year ago, right? More than a year ago you graduated. When you looked at the flyer, what did you think? Can you recall what you thought about it and perhaps what made you say yes? You went to a lot of people and suggest that they join you, but only one. So, what made you say yes to Operation Change?

Wanda: I think it was probably because I'm at a point in my life where I'm doing a little bit more to prioritize taking care of me. Especially, like I said, I'm retired now. So, the full-time work portion of my life is over and that gives me a little more, free time, although I am involved in a lot of other things. I think they send out your name when you retire and ask you to be on a zillion boards, but other than that, I just decided it was time to prioritize myself. And even though it was a big-time commitment, three hours a week, every week, it flew, the time flew by. It was a big-time commitment but it was something that once I got started in it, I had to miss one session and it broke my heart to miss the one session that I did miss.

Dr. Gonzalez: Wow, that's amazing. It was a big commitment. And just for our listeners who don't know, Operation Change is a community-based behavioral change program that's targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latino, or live in rural communities who are obese and experiencing joint pain due to limited mobility. As Wanda was sharing, it's a three-hour program. The Operation Change program includes structured

physical activity, it's focused on awareness and education to motivate, sustain behavior change. It was a big commitment, three hours a week. And actually, the Hazard program was our first rural community program, and it was not held on the weekends. It was held on a weeknight after work, pretty much, 4:30 PM to 7:30 PM. So, Wanda, did you ever participate in any program like the Operation Change before?

Wanda: No. I've never seen anything that I don't know, it seemed just so much that it was geared toward me. It was my age group and the issues with physical mobility. I blew a knee out 30 some years ago and ACL, MCL never had them fixed. I probably should've done that. So, joint pain and issues with mobility, that kind of thing were definitely, something that caught my eye. And the idea that there was still activity and motion that I could do that would help me at my age to move better and just live better was what appealed to me so much.

Dr. Gonzalez: It was the movement portion and the fact that they were talking about joint pain and something that was impacting your life. And you thought maybe I'll take a chance, right. I'll take a chance on this. How did you feel the first day of the session? Because they had all those stations to take measurements and make you do assessments. They were assessments really. How did you feel that first day in that group? Because I think there were almost 50 women there that day.

Wanda: Yeah. I was very shocked at the number of people who committed to that. Yes, we ended up with, I think we had four teams and broke them into groups of about 12 to 13 people per group. We're in a small town, so I knew probably the majority of people and some of the people knew me and I didn't know them, but they knew me, because like I said, I worked in education for so long, but by the time we finished and most people stuck with it the entire way through, by the time we finished I felt like I had really close relationships with just about everyone in all the groups, not just my group.

Dr. Gonzalez: I think that's an important aspect of Operation Change. So, you said you knew a lot of the people and a lot of the people knew you, but you know how we know people and don't know people.

Wanda: There are levels of knowledge. And the thing is we had three portions for the three hours. We had the movement. We had the education and then we had what I call a support group. I think probably 99% of the people that participated would say that the support group part was the most important part. Getting together in those smaller groups and talking about different things. They always give us topics and usually it had something to do with whatever we had done in our education session. But those small groups, my group, we tended to be the last ones out of the building. We always

ran long. We were a pretty, talkative bunch. But that was my favorite part of the whole thing. So, I think most people that participated would say that as well.

Dr. Gonzalez:        So, you got together, you were put in teams. What was your team color, Wanda?

Wanda:                Our team was blue, and we called ourselves the Blue Zone because that's places that are considered healthy. They research to try to find out why people who live in blue zones are healthier. So that was our goal to get healthier. So, we called ourselves the Blue Zone, finding a healthier life.

Dr. Gonzalez:        Finding a healthier life. So, there in Hazard, what you ladies did in your little groups, in your teams, you developed sayings for your group and yours was the Blue Zone, which was so phenomenal that you created these t-shirts with these sayings and it was just so spontaneous and so exciting.

Wanda:                Yes, and we wore them proudly. Each group, you had a color, you had a theme, and you wore your shirts each week to show people what group you were with. And if there was anything going on in the community that we could go to. Like, we went to the park for one of our activities to do something different. We went to the park one day and we all wore our

shirts so that people who were going through that park were like, "Who are they? And what are they doing?" And we liked that. We liked being the center of attention.

Dr. Gonzalez: You liked the park, you liked it. There was a speaking session of the program. And like you said, sometimes that topic carried over into your support group. Was there any session that really kind of hit home for you? Any speaker or session that really hit home for you?

Wanda: The ones that I personally enjoyed the most, we had a few and they were usually nutrition related. One was meal planning. Meal prepping was probably my favorite because the lady that did that had a busy lifestyle and so the tips that she was giving us were things that we could actually apply right then and didn't take a lot of extra effort on our part. It fit into even the busiest person who could make some of her tips fit in their lifestyle. We had a nutritionist that came, a dietician, and spoke with us also, and she was really good about giving. She passed out these little visuals like the size of how much protein you should have on your plate versus how many veggies and this and that. And I'm a very visual person. So, those kinds of things helped me. So, I really enjoyed the nutrition aspects of it. But then we had things that meditation and relaxation and helping you sleep and that kind of thing that I really found helpful too.

Dr. Gonzalez:        So, the program had different aspects to it. Right. And then you would move into a kind of physical activity because, as we said, motion is lotion, movement is life. I know you said you liked the outdoors. Was there any other physical activity session that maybe you liked or didn't like, or wish you could have done more of?

Wanda:                I loved them all. The one session that I told you, I did miss one time, a gentleman came and helped them with ballroom dancing. I wish I had gotten to do that one. That's the only one I didn't get to do. And they sounded like they had a great time. The ones that I really loved were yoga, it was stretching and movements. I was like, I would have never thought that my physique could do yoga. She made it very accessible for us, the kinds of things that we did. Then, we had just walking sessions and sometimes we did those in the building. Sometimes we did those outside the building. Sometimes we did them at the park, you know, those kinds of things. And walking is something that I think is assessable to most people. But even like when we had activities, if people weren't physically able to walk for very long or anything, when we did the yoga, when we danced or anything like that, we had chairs for people and they would do the arm motions and just move their feet if they couldn't move their whole body and that kind of thing. Just everyone can participate at some level in everything that we did.



Dr. Gonzalez: Now that the program exposed you to different movement activities, are there any activities that you have adopted in your daily life? Have you incorporated into every day?

Wanda: Yes. I do try to walk. I prefer walking outside, so I have to say we've had a little rain late recently and I haven't been able to get outside and I just find it kind of boring to walk in place at my house. So, I haven't done as well. But when I can get out and go walking is something that is definitely appealing to me. Also, Fitbits monitor your steps and so the ones that we got were waterproof, which is fabulous because my mother has a pool and I'm much more motivated to go and exercise in her pool than I am to get all hot and sweaty outside when the sun is out. So, the fact that it keeps track of my steps for me when I'm in the pool also is fabulous. So that's something that I utilize a lot. Especially, as I said, since I'm furloughed right now, I have a lot more, free time, so I can use it to do those types of things.

We still have a private Facebook group, and we try to talk to each other and motivate each other. So, sometimes when I'm getting a little lax, that kind of thing, I try to get on there and post things and people post stuff back and it motivates me a little more. We can't get together now to go walk in the park, for example, that was something that we could do before to sort of still stay in touch after our program ended. Now we can't get

together like that. So, I still use them for motivation through the Facebook group though. And I don't think I would have been as committed to it, had I not participated in Operation Change.

Dr. Gonzalez:        So, where do you think that motivation came from?

Wanda:        I love the fact that it was for women 45 and older because I think sometimes we think that once you get to this age, if you aren't in the greatest physical shape, or if you haven't made the best choices, nutritionally, that kind of thing in your life, that it's sort of too late and you just going to go with the flow for the rest of the time you have. And this made you really stop and think, like I said about prioritizing yourself and your health because you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself. I think women are such caregivers that they want to take care of everyone else. This Operation Change made you realize that you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of others. I think that's a message that women in our age range are also ready to hear. So, that I think helped a lot with the motivation for myself and all of us.

Dr. Gonzalez:        And that is key. I think the Operation Change really helps you kind of stop and say, "Wait a minute, I'm important too."

Wanda:        Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: And it's not too late for me to take care of myself too.

Wanda: Women of our age, like they would have a hard time going to a gym, motion moving on their own. I think that would be very intimidating. But when you're getting together with a group of women in your age range, a lot of them with the same types of physical limitations that you have, not only can you commiserate about them, which we did some, but you can learn ways to work around them.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, as you talked about Operation Change, you enjoyed the speakers, you learned about some nutrition, you've engaged in a lot of physical activities, different activities were exposed and you had a support group. And I'm really pleased to hear that support group continues on a Facebook page and that you support each other. At the end of the program, did you think it made a difference in your life?

Wanda: Definitely. We were the ones; we didn't want it to end. So, we actually begged until we got an agreement that we could continue to meet once a month, instead of once a week. We were meeting once a month and until February. We didn't get to meet in March, but we felt like it was such an important part of our lives. Like I said, it's easier to keep up that motivation, even if you're only meeting once a month, because you feel

like you have a little accountability, you don't want to let your friends down and that kind of thing. The people who considered doing Operation Change with us and didn't, I'm like, if they offer this again, you really need to do it. It's not just a game changer, but a life changer. And it has so much to do with your attitude. Like I said, the motion part of it, that hour was really, good and it gave me some good ideas. But the education aspect and the small group aspect were huge, and how much I've continued on after the program ended.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, there were things in that program resonated with, you stayed with you and the friendships and the bonds that you made through that support group continue. And I think that big piece of accountability of I'm going to do this for myself, and I'm going to show others that I've made the commitment to myself. Did you feel the others were doing the same too?

Wanda: Oh yeah, I really did. Like I said I would say 95% of us were there 90% of the time or more. I don't know how to explain it. It just sorts of drew you in and I couldn't stand the thought that they were there, and I wasn't. So, for example, I am the chairperson of our local County Fair and it runs on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. And Thursday is the night that we met for Operation Change. I would never in the past have considered, but I just told our board of directors, I said, "Listen, you're going to have to make it Thursday evening for three hours without me because I need to get to my

Operation Change meetings." So, again, the priorities had very much changed for me when I was able to say I need to do this for me. It just became second nature to me to think this is my obligated time. And if something else comes into that time, it's going to be secondary. I'll go if I can, but I'm not going to miss my Operation Change to do it.

Dr. Gonzalez:        You made yourself a priority. That's an amazing story, Wanda. That really an amazing story and such wonderful outcomes from that Operation Change program. 18 weeks, three hours a week. I remember the sighs of people at the beginning saying, "Oh my gosh, 18 weeks." And in the end, nobody wanted to leave.

Wanda:        Yes, nobody wanted to leave.

Dr. Gonzalez:        Nobody wanted to leave. So, are there any last words you want to leave us with before we close out with this podcast?

Wanda:        Well, I just want to say to anyone out there that's listening that thinks I can't do it, or it's too late for me to do it, that I felt pretty much the same way. And I have lost some weight, although the main priority was more to get healthy, but I have lost some weight and managed to keep it off even through this time. And I learned tricks for meal prepping and that kind of thing that I still use. And like I said, I made lifelong connections, people

that I will say in touch with always no matter what. I just think it's time for women of our age, especially, to start thinking about what you want the rest of your life to look like and how unlimited you want it to be. I love to travel and being able to move helps me to be able to do those kinds of things. So, again, I've got God kids, a great-nephew, and these young people that run around all the time and I want to be able to run around with them. So, by putting myself first, I put myself in a better position to be able to do those types of things.

Dr. Gonzalez:        Sounds great. So, Wanda, thank you so much for sharing your journey with Operation Change. I'm glad it had such a positive impact on your life. I hope you get to travel as much as you want and run around with those grandkids as much as you can. I want to thank Operation Change and the program directors for the work that they do. And I want to thank our listeners for joining us on this edition of the Health Disparities Podcast. We hope you find this thought-provoking and maybe even inspiring. And from all of us at Movement is Life and the Health Disparities Podcast stay safe, stay well and join us again soon. Bye-Bye.

Wanda:        Bye, Rose.

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