

**Podcast Episode 69**

**Sonja's Story – When you have a Y membership but don't go, what might be missing?**

Meet Sonja from St. Louis. Sonja was intrigued when her husband brought home a flyer describing a health education program soon to start nearby. At the first class, Sonja found she was in a large group with around 50 other ladies, she was initially unsure. But this was a group who looked like her and understood her. There was no judgement, there was no pressure, instead a supportive community and an 18-week program that allows participants to get in touch with what really motivates them. Still in touch with her group via group text, they have also been a support system during COVID-19. "I'm really a loner, I don't like being in a big group, but by the end I would hug every last one of those women," she says. With Dr. Rose Gonzalez.

Posted on October 21, 2020.

Dr Gonzalez: Hello, and welcome to this edition of the Health Disparities Podcasts. I'm Dr. Rose Gonzalez, a nurse member of the Executive Steering Committee of the Movement Is Life Caucus. Today, I'm going to be joined by Sonja, who is a participant of our Operation Change program in St. Louis, Missouri in 2019, and for those of you who may not be familiar with this program, Operation Change is a community-based, behavioral change program targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latina or live in rural communities and experiencing joint pain due to limited mobility. The Operation Change program includes structured physical activity and is focused on awareness and education to motivate sustained behavior change. So, good day to you Sonja and thank you for joining me.

Sonja: Oh, hello. I'm glad to be here.

Dr Gonzalez: How are you doing in Missouri, today?

Sonja: Oh, it's wonderful. It's hot but I'm inside cooling off, all is good.

Dr Gonzalez: All is good. So, why don't you tell our audience a little bit about yourself, Sonja.

Sonja: Alright. I'm Sonja Green. I'm going to be 61 in November, yes. I recently retired from Nestle-Purina a year ago. I learned about this program from my doctor's office and he had a handout in the office. And, my husband grabbed the handout, brought it home to me and I read it and I go, "I'm going to participate in this." So, that's how I got exposed to the program.

Dr Gonzalez: Wow, so you got exposed because your husband brought you a flyer from the doctor's office.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: When you saw the flyer, what was the thing about the flyer or the program?

Sonja: Well, it had the flyer, and then, it says, "Do you want to make a change in your life?" Again, I just recently retired and some of my friends and family, they're retired and I'm looking at them and here on the pamphlet, on the flyer, it was talking about weight loss, obesity, movement, arthritis. I'm like, I didn't retire to sit down to get fat or not to be able to move around. My husband is planning on retiring a year later. So, what are we going to do? I thought it was interesting. I said, "You know what? I'm going to call the number and just hear what this program is all about." They set up the meeting and there was all of these women. I was like, oh my God, what's going on. I looked around and here, Marva Williams was the nurse practitioner that I was seeing at the clinic, at the doctor's office. So, I'm like, "Okay, wait a minute. She's part of this." She had the guest speakers come

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

in, she had the material, and I was really excited about it. I said, "No, I need to be a part of this." If I'm going to retire, I need to have some type of activity, a weekly thing that I needed to do. So that got me excited. I was ready.

Dr Gonzalez: You were ready. You were ready for it. The fact that it dealt with some of the issues that you saw some of your family members experiencing, you wanted to make sure that you could keep moving, you know, as you now have more time on your hands because you're retired and you wanted to be able to enjoy life. So, that kind of spurred you to go to the meeting and find out. The icing on the cake was Marva was there.

Sonja: Yes, and not only that, the guest speakers that were there and to talk about the materials that they gave everybody and within that material it said that look this will be a commitment. Are you willing to commit for 18 weeks, and I'm like, "Hmm, can I really do this?" So, you had a timeframe calling the number back or emailing saying, yes, you know what, you can commit to this particular program. So, I came home, and I was talking to my husband. It took me a week. I'm like, no, you know what? I want to see what this really is all about and I'm going to make this commitment. Best thing that ever happened to me.

Dr Gonzalez: Wonderful.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: Wonderful. Have you ever participated in a program like this before?

Sonja: No. I'm a member of the Y, but I wasn't participating, going up to the Y. Even though, I was doing my membership, you know, paying every month, but I wasn't motivated to go.

Dr Gonzalez: Talk to me about that motivation and some of the changes that you may have made in your life due to the Operation Change.

Sonja: I went to this meeting and well, the program, they meet every Saturday morning. They were women that looked like me. That was the thing. They looked like me. We were put into groups and everyone had a voice. You tend to think that, okay, here women of color and we have this voice, but a lot of us wasn't talking it was okay. You know? Our team leaders said it's okay. We will get there. What is it about this program and what you want out of it?

Dr Gonzalez: Right.

Sonja: I'm like, well, I know that at different times I have some knee issues. I want to be able to move. They go, "Well, what's stopping you now?" I said, "Motivation. Maybe I need a partner." I go well, you know what your team, right here, is your partner. We're going to help motivate each other at our own levels and we all had a voice. That was the thing. There's people that look like me. They're from my community and we have a voice.

Dr Gonzalez: It sounds like there was no real pressure. It was up to you to decide what you wanted to do.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: And it allowed you to create what it was that you wanted, what change you wanted. How different did you feel after the program?

Sonja: Oh, I lost ten pounds, but, not only that, my husband, he seen it in me, and he goes, "You're making a point of walking, doing steps a lot. Why you doing that?" I go, "You

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

know what? This program from day one," I forgot about this, "They gave us a Fitbit." I consciously said that look, I'm going to put on this Fitbit every day. They encourage you to set a goal for yourself. I said, "You know what? I'm going to try 5,000 a day." I was doing it and then like, oh man, on the Fitbit, it gives you a little buzz or saying, "Can I get another maybe 21 more steps or 125?" I'm like, you know what? I can do this. In the house, when I'm not at the program or because during the summer when it's hot, oh no, well, I need to go downstairs, and I need to wash my clothes. I'll wash a little clothes and then, I'll bring it back up the steps, little bundles. Not the whole basket, little bundles, little things [inaudible 08:24] in me to deal with these steps and go back down. Okay, not to go down and sit because I've got a television downstairs.

Dr Gonzalez: Okay.

Sonja: I could stay down there and just sit, not doing anything, but no do the laundry, bring up a little bit at a time, not the whole basket, a little bit at a time. So that motivated me to do some more steps, to move.

Dr Gonzalez: Right.

Sonja: The thing was when you move it's like lotion because you're moving in those joints. They're not sticking.

Dr Gonzalez: Right.

Sonja: They're able to just move around.

Dr Gonzalez: Right.

Sonja: Yes, if you have arthritis, it hurts and your brain tells you, "Oh, just sit down. You don't need to do that." No, move anyway. Push yourself. A little bit at a time, and it motivated me. Yes, I'm doing it. I got the Fitbit. They bring in other people into the program with different exercise. They made it for four hours and we have a guest speaker. Then, we have our time together in our groups. Then, we have somebody come in and do the exercise part of it. One of the fun exercises was we had this hoola hoop and the hoola hoop is weighted, and I'm like, I can do a hoola hoop. I can hoola hoop for an hour with the one and a half pound, a weighted hoola hoop.

Dr Gonzalez: Wow.

Sonja: Wow. So, you're moving. Okay, I'm getting excited, now. It's exciting. I'm still doing it, even after the program is over with.

Dr Gonzalez: That's amazing.

Sonja: It's exciting. You know? The team leaders that call you, you know, just to check in, call you or send you an email to say, "Hey, you know what? I'm checking in." So, this is great.

Dr Gonzalez: So, you incorporated movement and you were thoughtful. It became a part of your thinking every day that you wanted to get a certain number of steps, you wanted to keep, and you changed your behavior because like you said you weren't bringing up the whole basket, which, you know, you could have done, but you said, okay, no, I'll challenge myself and I'll go up and down and I'll have those steps. That program, now, like it is over a year ago and you're still doing it. That is amazing. Meanwhile, you were paying for a gym, right?

Sonja: Yes.

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

- Dr Gonzalez: At the Y, and you couldn't, even though they have all these machines and classes, you couldn't get there. You couldn't get yourself to get there to do it. It shows, almost like you almost don't need the gym. I mean the gym is a nice thing but it's really about what commitment you made to yourself.
- Sonja: Yes, exactly.
- Dr Gonzalez: To create this change, and the term that you were talking about the lotion, the term that we use is, "Motion is lotion."
- Sonja: That's it. That is it. Oh my God, yes.
- Dr Gonzalez: The motion is lotion, and that's because we say when you move your joints, the fluids around the joints start to move to lubricate and loosen them and that's why you want to keep moving, so you don't have that tightness and those joints doing get brittle and dry.
- Sonja: Yes.
- Dr Gonzalez: So, I think that's amazing because like we said, a year ago, this program we would have started it and this would have been our second year, but we weren't able and you are still engaged in those behaviors. So, you know, that's excellent. Why don't we talk about the programs and kind of dissect the programs a little bit? So, each session would start with a speaker, right?
- Sonja: Yes.
- Dr Gonzalez: Who focused on some aspect of health. Was there any speaker or topic that really impacted you the most and, if so, what was it about?
- Sonja: Your food intake. How we as African Americans, our family, we use a lot of oil, fats. How to make that meal trimming back on some of the fat, which still is good for you. You have your exercise, but what about your meals. Not just talking about just the calories, okay, but how are you preparing your meals. Let's get some more leafy vegetables in there. Oh, the recipes that were given to us, oh my God, wonderful, wonderful. Eat more salmon, sardines. You rinse the sardines off. Whole grains.
- Dr Gonzalez: Yes, whole grains.
- Sonja: Girl, oh my God, it was wonderful. I eat a lot more salad than I used to. When I'm at the grocery store, I'm looking. When I buy the bread is it whole grain bread. Not just take on the white bread but maybe some of the whole wheat. Little changes. Not necessary you got to do it all in one day, little changes. Different because I'm a diabetic, different tea that I can purchase with my diabetes and also my husband has high blood pressure, that will help with high blood pressure. I'm like, "Oh, my God," you know, and telling us, too, where you can go and buy them within the community.
- Dr Gonzalez: Nice, nice.
- Sonja: Oh, it was awesome. It really was.
- Dr Gonzalez: So, you've got education on nutrition. Right?
- Sonja: Yes.

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

- Dr Gonzalez: You've got exposure to eating more vegetables, eating more fruits, probably, more salads and even not always having that meat with your meal, at every meal. And now, they're giving you also recipes to try and you're getting to try because I've tried some of the food. I went to St. Louis and they had some real interesting different types of food and it was interesting to be able to try it and be open to try it, and then, have the recipe there, so you can make it at home. So that was good. Did anybody come and do a food demonstration?
- Sonja: Oh yes. We've had about four different people to come in.
- Dr Gonzalez: Okay.
- Sonja: They demonstrated the food. Reading the packaging, especially, when you're talking about noodles. You can get soy noodle versus just the regular noodles and where you can purchase them and that they're not expensive.
- Dr Gonzalez: Right.
- Sonja: When you're talking about tomato sauce, you can make your own tomato sauce. Have fresh tomatoes.
- Dr Gonzalez: Right.
- Sonja: Mix in a pinch of seasonings. Very simple, inexpensive. You don't have to go out and buy just organic because buying organic, too, can be expensive.
- Dr Gonzalez: Yes.
- Sonja: If it's not in your budget, no you don't have to do that. Another thing, too, was the sweetener. Regular sugar, you can have what was it Tivia?
- Dr Gonzalez: Oh, Stevia.
- Sonja: That's it, yes. You can substitute that. They brought in packages of that for us to try and you can come back and let them know how did that work for you. That some of the ladies in your group, well from another group, she had a vegetable garden. She'd bring in all of the vegetables or whatever, different things that you want. My team leader, Regina, she had different types of teas. Oh my God, it was just different. Marva had her husband to come in, Dr. William, bring in a dish that they made. Everyone was contributing something. You didn't have to if you didn't want to. There was no pressure. It was just nice. The group was just nice. Oh my God, it was comfortable, really comfortable.
- Dr Gonzalez: So, it was an environment that made you feel comfortable and made you comfortable enough to try different things.
- Sonja: Yes, exactly.
- Dr Gonzalez: So, let's talk about the second hour. The second hour of the program was really about movement. So, as you feel this comfort, now, you've got your lectures and you're learning about nutrition and different foods, and now, the second hour is let's talk about movement. I see that you have the hoola hoop, so that's kind of stayed with you. What other thing was important to you in that movement?
- Sonja: Well, we did belly dancing in which that was okay, belly dancing was okay, but it was they brought in a couple in which they were teaching us different line dancing. That was a lot better. That was a lot better on my joints and particularly for the older members, too. You

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

can get excited and you're thinking, "Hey, I'm dancing," you know, but you're moving. You're moving your arms, your knees. You're turning slowly, not fast that you'll end up slipping and falling or anything. They had different people to come in and we tried different type of movement exercise. We also had a rope, not a rope, but material in which you put down at the bottom of your feet. You lift it up to help you...

Dr Gonzalez: Oh, those stretch bands, the stretch bands.

Sonja: Like a stretch band, yes, yes. I mean, it was nice, truly nice, and then they weigh you, you know, and give you other exercises, just to see how fast you can walk from one end of the room to the other end for your benchmark, and then, four weeks, do it, again, and see where you're at. We always had a benchmark in different activities. I mean they brought in so many different people, to keep you motivated. And those that couldn't keep up, it was like, it's okay. When they see someone older kind of stumbling a little bit, it's like, okay, wait a minute, now, let's do this. You can do these exercises, too, sitting down.

Dr Gonzalez: Right, so, they kind of tailored the demonstrations so that people who wanted to be a little more active can engage, and then those who were having some challenges, they would modify it, right?

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: So, people wouldn't have to feel left out or less than, which kind of sometimes happens when you go to a gym and you see these bodybuilders and they're pushing weights and you're like, oh, I can barely do the treadmill, right. So that was a nice feature of the program. So, the variety, to tailor it to people, so everybody felt okay, everybody could engage at the level that they felt most comfortable with.

Sonja: That's right, that's right, exactly.

Dr Gonzalez: And those measurements that you talked about were the assessments that we do at 0, 9 and 18, so we can see, actually, so really, you could see what are the changes that are happening, the physical changes that are happening within you during the program. So, that walk, what we usually see is that people start to walk slower because they're not really engage in movement, and by the end, it takes them shorter time to go the distance, whereas, sometimes it took them a longtime to get there, but, at the end of the program, because of the increased activity and movement and their work within the program, their walk is quicker. Their step becomes quicker. They feel more confident and their pace is faster. So, we measure kind of that and really, look so that you can say, "Oh, my God, I did. I did do that," and those are the subtle changes that kind of happen within the program that sometimes, we're not aware of.

Sonja: Especially, for me, and the different people on my team and on other teams, we get to talking because we also did a circle, in which there's time for each team to talk and go, "Okay, how did you do this week?" And some people felt bad that, "Look, I didn't get a chance to do this. I had other things with my family," and one of my team members, which is Freida, she said, "Look, you know what? I always thought about that I had to do for my family. My family, my family, my family and my friends, my church, and you tend to forget about yourself. This is for me."

Dr Gonzalez: Yes.

Sonja: I thought about that and I go, "You know what? You're exactly right. Thank you for saying that. This is for me." You have to put yourself first before you can help your family, your friend, your church. You're doing this for yourself. Put yourself first. This has motivated

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

me. I have this cluster, this group that can help me. Even though we're not meeting, right now, I can call them up. I have their number. I can send a text.

Dr Gonzalez: Oh, nice.

Sonja: To the group. There's a group text and say, "Hey, you know what? I need a little motivation." One of the team leaders will get back to us.

Dr Gonzalez: What color was your team?

Sonja: Purple Passion.

Dr Gonzalez: Oh, Purple Passion.

Sonja: Yes, yes.

Dr Gonzalez: What you were describing there Sonja was the third segment of Operation Change, which is really our support group kind of section where people gather together. Sometimes they discuss whatever was discussed by the speaker and they set their goals. Right? You said sometimes you would set your goals.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: Really, the group was there, it was a safe place, right?

Sonja: It's a very safe place, very safe. Everyone was encouraged to talk. Those that didn't want to talk didn't have to. You can listen or if you need to have a conversation away from the group, you can do that. It was very safe.

Dr Gonzalez: Through part of that work in that group and the speakers, you learn, hey, it's okay to put myself first. So, empowering you to say, hey, I'm good enough to come first. I don't have to put everybody before me. I deserve to be first at times. So, you were given permission and it sounds like many of you have adopted that philosophy because it's true. As women we tend to give, give, give.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: The well runs dry after a while. So, this is a place to replenish that well, and bonding place almost like a sisterhood, right?

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: A sisterhood because you're all women there. You're all on your own individual journeys in life but, you know, sometimes our journeys are the same.

Sonja: Yes, and that journey that's being the same was being able to get together and say, "Look, you know what? I can move. Yes, I'm having some health issues but these little things that I am learning from this program and from this group, as a whole, and then, the smaller group, I'm getting encouragement. I may not be able to do it all today, but I can look toward the future and I'm going to get there.

Dr Gonzalez: You're going to get there.

Sonja: I'm going to get there. And it's okay if I have a little bump in the road, but I'm going to get there, and I've got somebody, if it gets too rough I've got a group of women that I can call anytime, get a little encouragement, let me move on.

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

Dr Gonzalez: Reflecting back on the experience, were surprised by that, Sonja?

Sonja: Yes, yes and I am very judgmental and I'm really a loner and I don't like being in a big group. I need to sit back and look and make sure that, "Hmm, what are you talking about?" If something doesn't seem right, I'm one of those who jumps out there and go, "No, um-um, nope. I don't want to be a part of this. This is not me." It made me comfortable. By the end, I was willing to give folks a hug because I told them upfront, I was, "Nope, don't hug on me. Um-um, just stand back a minute. I've got to get to know you. So, don't come in and grab me. No, I'm not a hugger." But by the end, oh yeah, that group, I will hug every last one of those women.

Dr Gonzalez: Oh, Lord.

Sonja: Oh, yes.

Dr Gonzalez: That's incredible.

Sonja: Yes. Oh, they asked me if there's something if I could contribute to anything, you don't have to ask. What you need? I'm ready.

Dr Gonzalez: And all that happened in 18 weeks.

Sonja: In 18 weeks.

Dr Gonzalez: Eighteen weeks. Did you ever imagine that would happen in 18 weeks?

Sonja: No, I didn't even think I would last a couple of weeks. I didn't because I'm like, "Oh, I don't know. That's a commitment of being there at 9:00 o'clock. Do I want to do that because I love my weekends? You're talking about a Saturday morning.

Dr Gonzalez: Yes, a Saturday morning.

Sonja: Are you kidding me? Now, it was worth it, definitely. I would encourage anyone, just try it.

Dr Gonzalez: Just try it.

Sonja: Just try it.

Dr Gonzalez: Even the most skeptical of the people, right?

Sonja: Yes, oh, yeah.

Dr Gonzalez: Give it a try.

Sonja: Just try it.

Dr Gonzalez: So, the program changed the way you eat in some ways and look at food differently. Right?

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: It changed how you move on a regular basis and made you more thoughtful, more aware how important it is to move because you want more of life than just sitting downstairs in that basement or watching TV. Right? You want more than that.



## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: It opened your eyes to the fact that you are important and it's okay to take time for you.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: Right?

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: And it opened up this sisterhood that you weren't even looking for. Okay, so, they were out there, and you were like, "Don't touch me." I'm from New York, so I can very much relate. Don't look at me and don't touch me. You just stay right there. I can talk to you but don't come near and now, you're willing to embrace them.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: You're willing to embrace them and they've become a very important part of your support and now your new journey. Right?

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: That is wonderful.

Sonja: When my family and other friends that haven't seen me in a while because of this COVID, and they see me and they go, "Oh my God, you've got pep in your step." I'm like, "Yes, I do."

Dr Gonzalez: You see, wow.

Sonja: Yes, I do. Now, my daughters, which are my daughters-in-law, but I call them my daughters. They come over and they look, and they go, "Oh, you're really looking healthy. Look at you. You're getting skinny." I'm like, "No, I don't think I'm getting skinny. I think that my body is firming up and I'm enjoying it. I'm enjoying it." My husband he's looking he goes, "Whoa, look at you." I'm like, yeah. So, this is good. This is really, truly good. They did give us, which I did pick it up from the doctor's office, a certificate and everything. Well, I have that and I'm proud of that. I've got that upstairs. It's on my wall. So that's a reminder, Marva has passed. Is there anyone that would like to be a team leader, if they're interested in that role. I put my name in.

Dr Gonzalez: Excellent.

Sonja: I stated that I'm trying to get a couple of people from my family to also participate.

Dr Gonzalez: Good.

Sonja: And, when it comes back, which it will...

Dr Gonzalez: It will.

Sonja: When it come back, hey, you know what? Let's do it.

Dr Gonzalez: As we leave our listeners, what are some kind of final words, because it sounds like you had a wonderful experience and it really has impacted your life. So, what are some final things you would say to our listeners about your experience and your journey through Operation Change?

## 20201021-MIL Podcast Episode 069 Sonja's Story

Sonja: My journey was a wonderful journey. If you're thinking about participating, don't think about it, just do it.

Dr Gonzalez: Just do it.

Sonja: Just do it. Give it a chance. If you feel that once you're involved, you may think that it's not for you, talk to someone in the group, but the main thing, give it a chance. Yes, it's a commitment of 18 weeks, it's worth it. It's worth it. Just be yourself.

Dr Gonzalez: Good words. Thank you, Sonja, for everything. Thank you for your Operation Change experience for willing to try it and thank you for showing us that you can make a change and you can keep the change after the program and through that you can also have a support group and some new friends, and some people who you can care about.

Sonja: Yes.

Dr Gonzalez: And will support you as you continue to enjoy your life. So, congratulations.

Sonja: Thank you.

Dr Gonzalez: You were so wonderful. So, really inspirational, Sonja. So, I thank you so much for sharing your story. I want to thank you for sharing your journey and I want to thank our listeners for joining us today. We do hope you find this edition enlightening and inspiring. I did. I know I found it very inspiring. Sonja, you know, you've taught us that we can do anything, just do it. So, from all of us at Movement Is Life, and the Health Disparities Podcast, stay safe, stay well and join us again, soon. And for more episodes, please visit [MovementIsLifeCaucus.com](http://MovementIsLifeCaucus.com). Thank you, Sonja, thank you, listeners. Adios, until the next time.

Sonja: Thank you, bye.

Dr Gonzalez: Thank you, bye.