

Podcast Episode 74

Lynn's story:

A new outlook on life from new knowledge gained – and her fitness tracker.

Operation Change provided Lynn with invaluable knowledge and a new support network. In her 70s and busy in retirement with volunteer work, Lynn became more conscious of her diet, her physical activity levels, and she became a Fitbit enthusiast. “I gained insight in terms of how the body works and what you can do to ward off some things. Don't leave it to fate and be proactive,” she says. Once the Operation Change program at Grace Baptist Church, Mt. Vernon, had finished, Lynn joined another program and has kept up with her new regimen. With host Dr. Rose Gonzalez.

All views and opinions are the participants own.

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, promoting physical mobility to improve the quality of life. I will serve as your host for today's podcast and I'm so excited that I'm joined by a colleague of mine, whose name is Lynn. She was a participant of our Operation Change Program at the Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, New York. How are you doing there today, Lynn?

Lynn: I am doing so great, so well, and I attribute a lot of my progress to Operation Change.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's wonderful.

Lynn: It gave me a new outlook on life and how I approach life in terms of health. The knowledge I gained is invaluable and I continue to grow and build on the progress I've made. I miss it.

Dr. Gonzalez: You miss it?

Lynn: Yes, I do miss it a lot.

Dr. Gonzalez: Tell me a little bit, just a little bit more about yourself and your background and your connection to Grace Baptist Church.

Lynn: Okay. Well, right now, I'm a retired educator. I've been retired for about 10 years now. I worked for over 40 years in education. All levels, all things from library to coach, to mentoring, to teaching. And now I just enjoy volunteer work. I volunteer at a botanical garden. Of course, it's been closed, just got open. I volunteer at my church, which is Grace Baptist Church. So, I was very happy when they introduced this program. I was happy to be included in the first batch. It's like I said, has changed my life

tremendously because I'm more conscious of what I eat. I try to do my exercise every single day. One of the good things about the program is we got Fitbit. So, I was always active, but the Fitbit helps me to be more accountable. So, now, I'm conscious of trying to get the recommended 10,000 steps a day. The information in terms of the doctors coming to lecture us and focusing on diabetes, dementia, healthy foods, that was a good part of the program, bone, Alzheimer's. It was a wealth of knowledge. I gained insight in terms of how the body works and what you can do to ward off some of these things. Yes, you're going to get older. I'm in my seventies, but there are certain things you can do so that you don't leave it up to faith. Let's say you could be proactive and that's what they gained in terms of the information watching videos here and the lecture. Oh wow. I also enjoyed the different workouts. The dancing. The different dance moves, that was fun. The chair exercises. It was a very well-rounded affair. And because of that, I said, well, I'm going to continue this, you know, this is not going to be just do it and that's over and done with. So since then, I've always been active in terms of, exercising to a certain extent, walking to a certain extent, but like I said the Fitbit held me more accountable. So, when the program was over, I got involved with another program called Heart Smarts, and that was more of the same keeping our steps every day, doing it, constantly. I didn't realize how much salt goes into food, the hidden trigger. So, now, I'm really conscious of reading the labels. I rather cook more. So, I've been trimmed after all that. So that's

one of the reasons why I have the blood pressure thing. I checked my blood pressure, but in my family, there is a history of high blood pressure. Diabetes runs in my family; Alzheimer runs in my family. So again, I'm trying to be proactive. My blood pressure is reasonable. Although I've been informed that the new normal is like 110,120. I stay in the 130's, but I'm making progress.

Dr. Gonzalez: It sounds like you've made some changes, in your life, because of Operation Change. So, I'm going to just tell the listeners what Operation Change is, which is really a community-based behavioral change program targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latina, or live-in rural communities who are obese and experiencing joint pain due to limited mobility. The Operation Change program includes structured physical activity, and it's focused on awareness and education to motivate sustained behavior change, all which you talked about. And the lack of mobility frequently leads to obesity, and like you said, high blood pressure, diabetes. The program helps an individual, a woman like you to kind of gain more knowledge and then to adopt behaviors that would continue to help her if she wants to stay healthy. I know you've shared a lot about what the program is doing and how you've progressed, but when you first heard about the program, what were some of your initial thoughts when they first brought it up to Grace Baptist Church?

Lynn: Well, my initial concern was that it was like an 18-week commitment and I know they wanted you to come every Saturday.

Dr. Gonzalez: Tell me about, what you thought about Operation Change when you first heard about it at Grace Baptist Church. What were your thoughts and how did you feel about joining the program?

Lynn: Well, I was happy to join. It was a huge commitment. I know that we had to give 18 weeks and I had scheduled a couple of trips before I knew about the program. But once I was assured that I could still continue, I just missed two. I was so happy to be kept into the program. I enjoyed the teams that we worked with. Some of the women in my team, I still talk to. Of course, I didn't know everybody in the church and we didn't know all, and now we send cards to each other. We call each other, we try to encourage each other to walk still, to eat properly. And, some of the things the exercises we joke about because the dance routines that we developed. So, I really enjoyed that collaboration.

Dr. Gonzalez: Talk to me a little bit. What, color of the team were you on?

Lynn: I was on the yellow team.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you were on the yellow team, and all the participants are broken up into groups, right? Into these teams that become their group for the whole 18 weeks. And you have an individual there, who is responsible for that team and guiding that team, a motivational interviewer, we call them.

So, you start out with a program and we'll get back to the speaker, and then, you did some exercises, but talk to me a little bit about your team and how that helped you during the program. What kind of things happen during that team encounter that helped you through that program?

Lynn: Well, I first want to talk about how we got into the teams. Which I thought was a great thing, because everybody was handed these different color folders, and then we found out, well, you're going to be in the yellow team, but it was arbitrary. So, you didn't get to sit with friends or people that you knew. So, part of that was educational, my coach was Adele Dowdy. Deacon Adele Dowdy was getting us to interact with each other, build that trust. Let everybody know that it was open and whatever conversation, we said, we can know that we're not going to take it back. It was not a gossip session, but it was a support session.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you were given a folder, you were put into this team and it was deliberate that you weren't going to be totally with maybe the person you

had come with to the program, but it was going to be a brand-new kind of group.

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: What were your feelings when you realized you were in this group and you weren't with anybody else?

Lynn: Basically, I know that I was in church. Not everybody in the group went to Grace Church, but that was okay. Everybody was trying there to get the best of themselves to become better, to grow. So, it was like-minded people. So, that didn't bother me at all.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, there was a group of you who were like-minded, who had come there to really work on themselves, to do something good for themselves. Now, what, helped you in that journey for the change? What do you think may have been some of the most impactful things that happened during that journey that helped you become a newer self of Lynn?

Lynn: I think the testimonies from not just in my team, the other teams talking about how and why they got here, what they had to overcome, what they're trying to overcome. It was very emotional and not everybody was at the same level and we had to support one another. There were some

people that walked with a walker, there were some people there that had like braces. And they were all trying to move, all trying to grow, all trying to be the best possible self that they could be. So, I think because we want top athletes that we knew that we could do this and we encouraged each other, in any shape, form or fashion, the fact that we called each other and said, well, "How are you doing?" You can go get through that. And if anybody was absent, especially, we'd call to say, "Are you are you okay?" That type. So, it was a very comforting atmosphere. The questions that were asked of us were thought provoking. I remember we had to do evaluations of the speakers and the various doctors. And I'm so grateful to Grace, because we had a variety of doctors in the different areas. And I liked that one and one, that you could ask the questions and get, answers in real time.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, Lynn, the program starts with a speaker. They always, plan the speaker to share some information about either some medical issue, whether it's arthritis, whether it's heart disease, whether it's emotional support. Because we see that depression is huge among women especially women, who have gone through life's journey and have had challenges posed to them. So, the speakers, you felt comfortable with them and it provided an opportunity for you to ask questions. It's like something you never really get when you're in a provider encounter. Like to see a physician or a nurse practitioner and you have a short amount of

time, but now you have somebody coming to you for an hour sharing information. So, you felt comfortable?

Lynn: Very.

Dr. Gonzalez: And was there one special speaker that you really learned the most from or were really surprised at?

Lynn: I wouldn't say there was one, I learned a lot more about arthritis for example, and how the body works. That's another one of my ailments is arthritis and I have it in my shoulders and neck. So, there were things that they spoke about to help you relieve it and what you could do. It's also about what you eat and information. So, whether it was knowledge about the sugar and salt intake and the statistics that shocked me. I always knew that African Americans had more high blood pressure and more diabetes. But why? And again, it's food choices, etc. something that you're condition to eating and that you have to want to change. And it's, gradual, it's not done overnight, but you have to have the mindset to do it. So, the speakers really were specific in terms of suggestions, resources that you could read on your own. Also, as a follow-up. I liked the idea that we had to journal. That was another way that we got close, because as we talked in our journals about what we did for the day, what might have been

temptations for us, what might have gotten us off track, what we did to get back on track, we were able to share that in our groups and that was it.

Dr. Gonzalez: What I was going to ask. So, you had a speaker, gave you information and really went down into some depths. So, you gained an understanding of what some things might be under your control to change.

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: And many people came there because they wanted to work on their life. And then the journal helped you document the change and held you accountable, as well as that team, your supportive team because you learn about something, you say, "Oh, maybe I should try that. Maybe that'll help me." And then you try it. Maybe you felt better. And then you document it, and you say, "Hey, that really worked report out." And so how was the team when you were reporting out, did they ever get to you and say that wasn't what you're supposed to do? How was the team?

Lynn: No, they did hold us accountable. One of the things we wanted as a team is to not only eat, right. Drink, more water. We learned all about the benefits of drinking water and cleansing our body. So, in the journals, we put down how much we did. So, then if one of us said, "Oh, well, I had a

potato chip binge, or a French fry binge, or chicken fried.” We know that fried foods are not good, but we're all weak.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right.

Lynn: So, we just say, okay, you had it. Now you can go for it and get back on track. So, like I said, helped us to say, don't get down on yourself, just because you slipped. You can continue.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, there was, not really punishment, but saying, okay, maybe you fell off the wagon, but you can get up and you can do it again. And they'll be there to help you on that journey.

Lynn: Exactly. And then, also, we saw results because a lot of the things, I think it was every six weeks we got to measure, we got to weigh and take our blood pressure. So, actually, we saw progress. So, that's encouragement, it's one thing to do all of this, and there's no weight loss. You're not feeling any better, you're not increasing, whatever it is that you're trying to do. The proof was in the pudding.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, what you're saying is, with Operation Change, we do assessments of individuals just for your own purpose, for the participants own purpose. And we do blood pressure. We do weight, and it's not a

weight loss program, but you sometimes see a loss in weight. If you decrease, if you're more mindful of what you're eating, you're journaling, you're moving more and you might see some weight change. And that weight change, when we come in, I think at nine weeks, and then at 18 weeks, some people improve by walking faster because they weren't walking at all. And so now the speed of their walk has increased, or, they're just more limber or less pain. So, one of the things to encourage movement because movement becomes boring at times, was they always had a movement program. So, I heard you say something about, did you do an Afrobeat or praise dancing?

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: What were some of the things that they did in your movement segments?

Lynn: Oh, from praise dancing to Afrobeat, to chair exercises, to like tapping almost.

Dr. Gonzalez: Wow. Gregory Hines.

Lynn: Yes. Floor exercises that we had and yoga. We did the mats, you name it, we experimented in it, and it was different types of music, also.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, Lynn, I was just going to ask you, I didn't catch that last phrase.
 Would you, share again, the dances that you were doing? So, you said
 jukebox was that what I heard?

Lynn: No. Kickboxing.

Dr. Gonzalez: You did kickboxing?

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: You did kickboxing? Was anybody afraid to do the kickboxing?

Lynn: We had a good time.

Dr. Gonzalez: I'm scared of you now.

Lynn: It was very elementary now, but learning how to pick up our legs and kick
 around. It was fun.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you're doing yoga, you're doing kickboxing. You did some
 Afrobeat and some praise dancing. So, what is praise dancing?

Lynn: Well, it's listening to spiritual music and expressing yourself that way. You're praising God, actually, but it's spiritual music as opposed to secular music.

Dr. Gonzalez: Okay.

Lynn: But everything was fun. We did, rap. Dancing to rap too. So, we were very inclusive. We did, Caribbean music and dance to that, and we did Limbo.

Dr. Gonzalez: Oh no.

Lynn: You name it. We did it.

Dr. Gonzalez: Oh, wow. So, are there any dances or are you still doing kickboxing or are you still doing that?

Lynn: No, that I'm not doing, but I like to dance. We did a lot of the step dances. I still do that, the line dances. So, that I still do. And, I'll watch videos and try to do some of the exercises, the steps that we were taught. That much I incorporated into my overall health regime for myself. I try to do, in the mornings, I start off, I do the strength training with the weights and running for a little while. I do calf raises. I try to do a variety of things, work on my breathing, and then, in the evenings or late afternoons, I walk. So, I could

get my 10,000 steps a day in. And so, there's some kind of movement. And then I kind of meditate and say, well, you're in a better place now, what can you do to even push it further.

Dr. Gonzalez: Wow. Sounds like you continue to challenge yourself on a daily basis. Were you doing a lot of these things before Operation Change?

Lynn: I was walking, and I did some exercise, but not to the extent that I do it, now.

Dr. Gonzalez: Wow.

Lynn: Like I said, I've joined other groups. So, like I have some friends in Cincinnati who also have Fitbits. So, on Wednesday's we do a Fitbit challenge. And why I like it. It's like the teamwork, everybody chooses the amount of steps they wanted to aspire to. So, it could be 6,000, 5,000, 10,000. You're not competing against each other. You're just competing against yourself to make steps. So, that's fun. And those that, don't make any steps we encourage them they can try the next Wednesday. So, [inaudible 24:14] Fitbit, you can cheer people on and encourage them. So, the Fitbits are great.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you have a team, I think you said it was in Ohio. Was that in Ohio?

Lynn: The Fitbit challenge team.

Dr. Gonzalez: The Fitbit challenge team, which sounds great. Some people had trouble with the Fitbits, but you're on a Zoom call, you do the Fitbit and now you got Fitbit challenge going on in Ohio. So, you're really moving right along. So, none of this stuff really intimidated you in the program.

Lynn: Oh, most definitely the Fitbit intimidated me. Thank God for the people at Grace that they were able to sync and pair it and I learned to use it. The Zoom, of course, when that first came out, I was intimidated. Now, I'm much more confident, but we have no choice.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right. So, that's good.

Lynn: Yes. Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: That's excellent. And then the group, early on as we were talking, you were talking about the group that you were in the Team Yellow, and you said something about that you still stay connected with them.

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Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: Tell me about how you stay connected with them?

Lynn: As I was saying, I see, some of them on Zoom because our church does have regular Zoom sessions in Bible study.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you made new friends.

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: And those friends you have this program in common. I know in your groups you used to stay together and motivate each other in the group in Team Yellow. So, is that something that still happens on your Zoom calls or on your phone calls or on your notes? Do other individuals, are they as engaged as you are maintaining what they started with Operation Change?

Lynn: Well, the ones that I speak to, yes, I'm sure Hazella, would probably know a little bit more because she was the overall group coordinator. COVID has made it extremely difficult for us to meet on a regular basis, unfortunately. So, it's more, like by phone calls, email or that type of thing. Very few people I know that I speak to on a regular basis have fallen off.

They're continuing to get their steps in, the best as they can, continuing to move, continuing to eat healthy.

Dr. Gonzalez: Nice.

Lynn: Continuing to watch what they eat, continuing to read something, educate themselves, and listen to the spiritual music that uplifts us.

Dr. Gonzalez: Nice. I'm going to try to summarize a little bit of what you said throughout this conversation, which is you joined Operation Change, you were ready to have a change. They kind of, in the way they divided the groups into teams, pushed you to get to know other people who you knew when you started. And in that team, you formed a group, who held each other accountable and became friends and actually have continued to stay in touch and continue to work on leading healthier lives. And along that journey, due to the speakers, you learn some things about health, about mental health, about physical health, about pain and arthritis, heart disease, and you were exposed to a variety of movements and exercises that you could then continue on your own. And it sounds like from what I hear you saying, is it kind of motivated you to even stay connected with the group, but also to try other programs so that you can continue on your wellness and healthy journey.

Lynn: Exactly. Exactly. Not only, the program in Cincinnati with the Fitbit's. Like I said, another program is over now, but Heart Healthy, which concentrated, again, more information on the correct foods. Focusing on diabetes, focused on high blood pressure and all the diseases that affect the African American community and how we can do a better job of controlling them. We saw links to different movies. They talked about the food industry that fascinated me and how commercials get you to eat the wrong things to suggest it.

Dr. Gonzalez: They entice you.

Lynn: You really don't think about it. The product placement. So, I said, "Oh yes, yes." And different suggestion for healthier meals. Before Operation Change, I wouldn't even think about having no meat.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, they really pushed you to explore new ways to be healthy in some ways.

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: They kind of almost laid it out there for you. They didn't force you. It wasn't forced or anything. They just kind of exposed you to this. And then

you started to feel better and say, "Well, I'm going to try that now. I'm going to try that now."

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: What a wonderful opportunity. And I'm just excited that you stayed connected and for the listeners, Mt. Vernon is right near New Rochelle, who was the first impacted by COVID the coronavirus early in March. And we were going to kick off the program. We had, actually done the kick-off for the program. We did the training and the kick-off for the program the second year of Operation Change at Grace Baptist Church. Unfortunately, the huge breakout of the coronavirus, the devastating impact it has had on Latino and African American communities was horrible. And most of what impacted them was not only the social determinants of health, but all those comorbid conditions that you talked about Lynn, the hypertension, the diabetes, the obesity, and now you're more cognizant, you're more aware it's like Operation Change has opened your eyes. I looked at commercials they're just trying to entice us to eat some bad food. So, hopefully the program has made a difference. And it sounds like it has made a difference for you and a lot of the people who went to your program. So, if you could, share your insight to someone who was thinking about it and say, why would you want them to join? Why

would anybody want to join Operation Change? What would be your big takeaways that you would say to somebody?

Lynn: I would say don't hesitate, you're enjoying yourself so much that the 18 weeks goes by and you end up missing that you can't do it anymore, the program. You meet great friends, you get great information and, it does change life. If you're serious about it. If you want to do well, you'll do well. And not everybody's going to come out equal. Equal efforts and you'll see results. Okay, no one is going to be a marathon runner. No one is going to be an Olympic swimmer, but we will move. And movement is life.

Dr. Gonzalez: Yes, this isn't a bootcamp or this isn't a training for the marathon. This is about trying to become more aware of a path towards, good health, right?

Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: And wellness and living a full life it sounds. Because now you've also made friends. Friends along this journey that you have stayed in touch with and could be there to be supportive. So, it sounds like you had a really wonderful opportunity and a wonderful experience with Operation Change.

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Lynn: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: Well, I'm so glad you were able to join it. So, I think I'm going to, thank our listeners now for joining us on this edition of the Health Disparities Podcast and I hope that you found listening to Lynn's journey in Operation Change, I hope you find it a little thought provoking, maybe inspiring, and anyone can change if they want to, if they put their mind to it. So, from all of us at Movement is Life and the Health Disparities Podcast. I thank you for joining us today. Stay safe, stay well. And join us again soon. Thank you. Bye-bye.

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