



## Wellness project sets a new pace in Preston

To hear Preston's elementary school physical education teacher tell it, pedometers in Preston this year are very big. "People are getting fired up. A lot of people are giving them out for Christmas presents," said Debbie Wilson. Under Wilson's lead, more than 125 elementary school teachers and staff in Preston have clipped on pedometers and are logging their daily clicks, going for a goal of 10,000 steps.

At Preston's high school, meanwhile, a milk machine offers a healthy alternative to pop, a fitness trail is going in near the elementary school, and at the extension office, a wellness support group led by University of Idaho Extension Educator Laura Sant meets monthly.

All of this, and more, is made possible by an innovative research and education project aimed at shrinking the swelling numbers of obese Americans. WIN the Rockies (Wellness IN the Rockies), focuses specifically on rural communities in three western states—Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana.

In each state, a "demonstrator community," Preston in Idaho, receives wellness "interventions" of their own design. Funded by a \$4.3 million, four-year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the project's aim is to improve the well-being of individuals in the demonstrator communities while strengthening their community's ability to support healthy lifestyle choices. A "comparator community" in each state—Idaho's is American Falls—will receive no interventions until the last six months of the study, allowing researchers to make comparisons between the two.

Distinguishing WIN the Rockies from so many other wellness programs is its emphasis on health, not dieting or weight, said Julie Harker, UI project coordinator. Diets "don't work," she said, "statistics show us that." Rather, WIN the Rockies focuses on "the principles of healthful, pleasurable eating."

It encourages daily, enjoyable physical activity and a positive body image based on a healthy lifestyle, not on the attainment of a specific weight or unrealistic shape.

Furthermore, the project is community based, relying on Preston's own "movers and shakers" to lead interventions, said Harker. "I'm letting them shape it and set it up how they'd like."

Rachelle Oliverson, a physical therapist, coordinates Preston on the Move, another pedometer-based walking program that has attracted participants from their teen years into their 70s. "We're really trying to spread this throughout the community," she said, "We'd like to put out 200 pedometers a year or more."

Bryce Bodily, a Preston cabinet maker, is one of a "cohort" of 50 Preston adults whose health and fitness will be tracked over three years. He has already participated in two interventions: a walking program, which he credits with reducing pain in his knees, and in "A New You: Health for Every Body," a 10-week program about food and fitness that freed him from his family's admonition to "clean your plate." "It was gentle encouragement and well done," said Bodily. "And I feel better, that's the bottom line."

To guide the interventions and judge their effectiveness, researchers in the three



Photo by Pam Benham

Preston's Ruth Smith, walking with her husband, David, tries for 15,000 steps a day on her pedometer. "I think there's a lot of good that come out of the grant," said Smith.

states are measuring adults' attitudes and behaviors with respect to eating, physical activity, and body image with written surveys; developing "community portraits" that detail everything from numbers of tennis courts to the square footage local groceries devote to produce versus pop; and measuring fifth graders' fitness.

Preston cohort member Ruth Smith finds her pedometer so motivating that she has given them to her children. "You feel a lot better physically and you feel better about yourself," she said.

Grant collaborators include the University of Wyoming, Montana State University, the WWAMI Medical Education Program, state extension services, and area health education centers in Wyoming and Montana.