

## Spiritual Fruits Combat Sour Grapes Over Blood Pressure

By Heather Murphy, Public Relations

Five years ago, Mary Joan Oexmann established what is known all over North and South Carolina as “Lighten Up,” a program that integrated spirituality and healthy lifestyles.

Well, the results are in and the program, research driven to ensure safety and efficacy, has graduated to a “standard practice of care” service model status.

Lighten Up works because Oexmann and her program assistant, Rhoda Ascanio, are reaching at-risk populations within the church community.

“Eighty-five percent are either overweight or obese, fifty-seven percent have high blood pressure, fifty-five percent have high blood cholesterol, and eighteen percent have diabetes. Reductions in blood pressure accounted for a thirty percent decrease in stroke risk,” Oexmann, program director, said.



Increased scrutiny concerning the national “obesity epidemic” has Americans pointing to a world with 170,000 fast food restaurants and too many hours in front of the tube as possible causes for the weight problems of sixty-five percent of adult Americans.

Whatever the causes, Oexmann and her colleagues site the enormous economic, physical, and spiritual consequences of increased weight, not to mention the \$100 billion spent annually on weight-related illnesses.

Since its incarnation, Lighten Up has spread to more than 50 churches, has 1,000 success stories, gained national recognition with a 2001 outstanding public service award, and is the focus of several research publications.

A nutritionist for 28 years, Oexmann’s passion is a vehicle for Lighten Up’s success. “Lighten Up is about being filled with light and letting that light shine,” she said. “My goal is not to tell people what to believe but to encourage a spiritual journey, whatever that may be. It’s a very personal thing and I respect that.”

The program reaches out to both African American and Caucasian populations with multiple cardiovascular risk factors within a church community.

Participants are encouraged to treat their bodies like temples of God, meaning a restoration of health through a combination of eating smart, exercising, and promoting spiritual growth.

Oexmann’s curriculum revolves around the “spiritual fruits,” reservoirs of strength from the Bible like love, knowledge, peace, faith, kindness, joy, self-control, and godliness. “Our world is filled with the

sour grapes of chaos, doubt, indifference, and ignorance. We have to believe that the world can be a better place as individuals accept responsibility for their health,” Oexmann said.

Lighten Up began in 1998 after Oexmann was approached by Brent Egan, M.D., Department of Medicine, to help write a grant for a biblically based community health and education program.

Ascanio came on board after the receipt of the Duke Endowment.

Funding for Lighten Up, housed in MUSC’s Digestive Disease Center, was achieved the first two years via the Healthy South Carolina Initiative and the last three through a Duke Endowment and donations.

Oexmann and Egan were practical in their goal setting with the hopes of reaching 200 people in the first two years. The goal was met in year one.

With increasing momentum, Lighten Up continues to expand throughout the Carolinas by “health ministers,” individuals who have completed the Lighten Up program and desire to take it to other church members and people in the community.

“By teaching people how to identify small changes that will result in success over time, they gain a sense of ownership over the program and that allows them to further build on their own personal strengths to make necessary lifestyle changes,” Oexmann said.

And as for Lighten Up’s future, Oexmann desires to make the program self-sustaining. Seeking funding to establish a new program called “Lighten Up for Families,” she hopes to turn the obesity epidemic around by working with MUSC dietitians, community centers, churches and Charleston Parks and Recreation. Oexmann is also looking to form a partnership with Habitat for Humanity.

“Helping others is probably good for your health. Also, I would like to see the day when people think of their bodies as a ‘habitat for humanity’,” she said. “Improving health through spiritual growth is challenging and truly gratifying as I watch people, who believed that staying healthy wasn’t a choice, embrace change.”

The suggested donation to enroll in Lighten Up is \$70 per person and includes two health checks, a 155 page Lighten Up book, nine sessions, and newsletters every two months. For more information about Lighten Up or to bring the program to your community of faith, go to [www.lightenupforever.org](http://www.lightenupforever.org) or call 792-3047.