

HEALTH

Finding Creative Ways to Combat Obesity

Campaigns reflect emerging priorities

(AP) — Nicole Ari Parker was motivated by frustration. For Star Jones, it was a matter of life or death. Toni Carey wanted a fresh start after a bad breakup.

All three have launched individual campaigns that reflect an emerging priority for African-American women: finding creative ways to combat the obesity epidemic that threatens their longevity.

African-American women have the highest obesity rate of any group of Americans. Four out of five black women have a body mass index above 25 percent, the threshold for being overweight or obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By comparison, nearly two-thirds of Americans overall are in this category, the CDC said.

Calorie-rich, traditional soul food is a staple in the diets of many African-Americans, and curvy black women are embraced positively through slang praising them as "thick" with a "little meat on their bones," or through songs like the Commodore's "Brick House" or "Bootylicious" by Destiny's Child.

A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and The Washington Post earlier this year found that 66 percent of overweight black women had high self-esteem, while 41 percent of average-sized or thin white women had high self-esteem.

Still, that doesn't mean black women reject the need to become healthier.

Historically black, all-female



Television personality Star Jones has launched a campaign that reflect an emerging trend among African American women: Finding creative ways to combat the obesity epidemic that poses a threat to their longevity.

Spelman College in Atlanta is disbanding its NCAA teams and devoting those resources to a campus-wide wellness program. In an open letter announcing Spelman's "wellness revolution," president Beverly Daniel Tatum cited a campus analysis that found many of Spelman's 2,100 students already have high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes or other chronic ailments.

"Spelman has an opportunity to change the health trajectory of our students and, through their influence, the communities from which

they come," Tatum's letter said.

Jones, who underwent open heart surgery in 2010 at age 47 and now urges awareness about heart disease among black women, was met by an overflow crowd earlier this year when she convened a Congressional Black Caucus Foundation panel on black women and obesity.

"We have to get ourselves out of being conditioned to think that using soft words so we don't hurt peoples' feelings is doing them any favor," Jones said. "Curvy, big-

boned, hefty, full-figured, fluffy, chubby. Those are all words designed to make people feel better about themselves. That wasn't helpful to me."

Jones once embraced being large and fabulous, at 5 feet 5 inches tall and 300 pounds. But under that exterior, she said, she was morbidly obese, suffering from extreme fatigue, nausea, lightheadedness, heart palpitations and blurred vision. The attorney and TV personality also had gastric bypass surgery in 2003.

Now, she advises women to make simple changes such as reducing salt intake, exercising 30 minutes a day, quitting smoking, controlling portion sizes and making nutritious dietary choices.

Nutritionist and author Rovenia M. Brock, known professionally as Dr. Ro, agrees with Jones. She said getting active is only about 20 percent of the fight against obesity. The rest revolves around how much people eat.

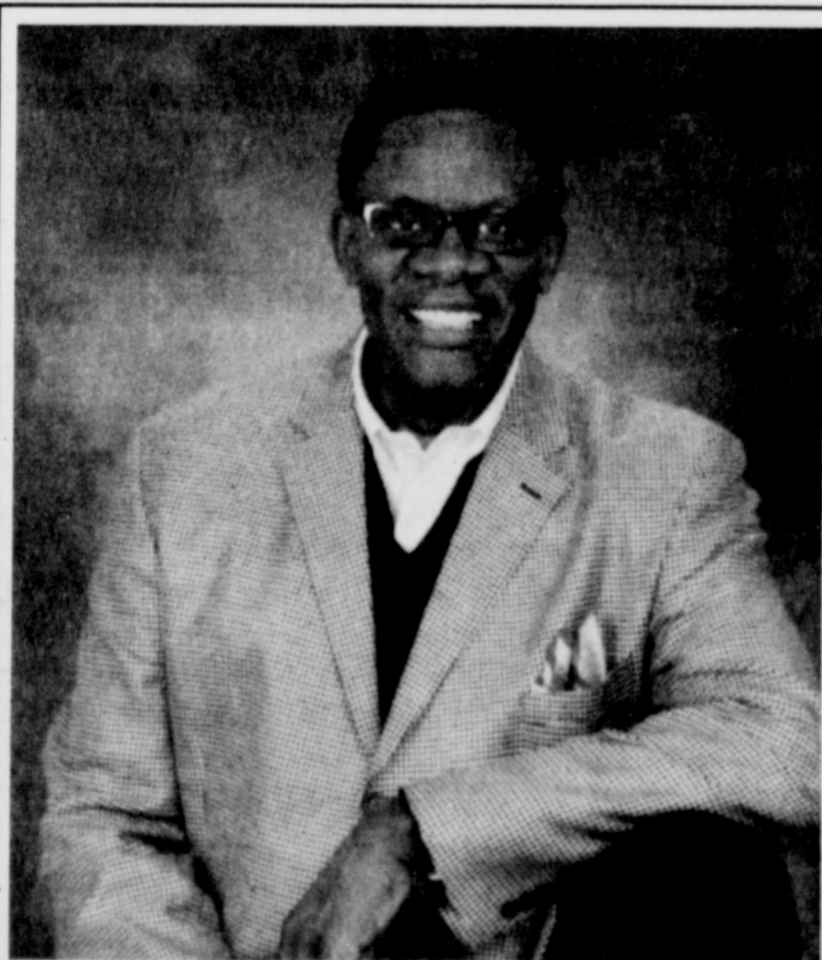
"Our plates are killing us," she said.

The spark for this current interest among black women may have been comments last year by Surgeon General Regina Benjamin, who observed publicly that women must stop allowing concern about their hair to prevent them from exercising.

Some black women visit salons as often as every two weeks, investing several hours and anywhere from \$50 to hundreds of dollars each visit — activity that, according to the Black Owned Beauty Supply Association, helps fuel a \$9 billion black hair care and cosmetics industry.

In an interview during a health conference in Washington last week, Benjamin said the damage sweat can inflict on costly hairstyles can affect women's willingness to work out, and she hopes to change that. She goes to beauty industry conferences to encourage stylists to create exercise-friendly hairdos.

"I wouldn't say we use it as an excuse, we use it as a barrier," Benjamin said. "And that's not one of the barriers anymore. We're always going to have problems with balancing our lives, but we could take that one out."



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type of pain often resolves on its own or with chiropractic treatment. If the pain lasts longer than a few weeks, or if you have noticeable weakness in your leg or foot, talk to a doctor about getting an MRI.

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