

Nurses seek help to continue healthy kids program

BY FRANCESCA DONLAN • NEWS-PRESS.COM • APRIL 19, 2011

Fort Myers—Three area nurses created a popular health program for kids — and they need your help to keep it going.

Nurses Ann DiMatteo, Diane Spicer and Joanne DeBiasa attend classes at Nova Southeastern University. As part of a student project, they designed an after-school program in Harlem Heights.

Today is their last official class, but they want someone from the community to step up and keep it going.

“I don’t want it to end,” said DiMatteo, who works full time as a renal transplant coordinator at Gulf Coast Regional Medical Center and goes to school full time.

“I’ve been a nurse since 1981 and I haven’t been this excited about anything.”

What excites her the most is that about 30 children ages 5 to 12 have spent the last six Tuesday afternoons learning about nutrition, safety, hygiene and exercise — and having fun doing it.

The three nurses partnered with the Lee County Health Department, which supports getting quality health education into communities such as Harlem Heights, said Diane Holm, spokeswoman for the department.

“Low income communities are more significantly impacted by chronic disease and early-onset Alzheimer’s,” Holm said. Children are also vulnerable to other risks as well, she said.

That’s why the three nurses invited Deputy C. Vernon Tyus from the Youth Services Division to talk about safety and making the right choices.

Last week, the kids had a visit from retired dentist Richard Holford, who taught them about dental hygiene.

They also made yogurt parfaits, ran laps and participated in an obstacle course.

Shayla McClinton, 11, learned that it's good to brush your teeth, she said.

"There's a lot of good exercise too," she said. "I'm going to start walking the whole park every Saturday and eat better."

DeBiasa enjoyed offering the children different kinds of fruit and vegetables.

"I couldn't believe how many children have never had celery," she said. "Some didn't like it but now they know what it is."

She has enjoyed watching them put their healthier lifestyle into practice.

"They are realizing that the quality of the food they eat impacts the quality of their health," DeBiasa said. "If anything, that's gotten through to them."

She's hoping someone in the Harlem Heights community can help these kids continue their healthy journey.

So does 10-year-old Gabriel Mendoza.

"I like it here because they give us healthy snacks and we run," he said. "I tell my parents that we're supposed to eat healthy stuff."