



Thursday, April 08, 2010

Olympians urge Creek to start movin', munchin'

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JUMP START — Olympians Casey FitzRandolph and Suzy Favor-Hamilton visited the Johnson Creek schools Wednesday to promote "Movin' and Munchin'," a healthy eating and fitness program administered by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and sponsored by the WEA Trust. Pictured above, FitzRandolph, a three-time Olympic speedskater and 2002 gold medalist in the 500 meters, touches pupils' hands as he enters the gym. — Daily Union photo by Pam Chickering Wilson.

JOHNSON CREEK - At age 5, dressed in hockey skates and a year younger than the youngest of his competitors, Verona native Casey FitzRandolph got his first taste of speedskating.

Racing in the 6- and 7-year-old category, the youngest class available, FitzRandolph won all three heats. One could say he never looked back.

Eventually, he became a three-time Olympian, earning the gold medal in the 500-meter race in Salt Lake City in 2002.

Stevens Point native Suzy Favor Hamilton took a little longer to set her sights on becoming a competitive runner. It was in fifth grade, upon hearing the cheers of her classmates as she crossed the finish line first, that she knew she wanted to do this for a living.

Favor Hamilton went on to become a three-time Olympian, along the way winning seven U.S. championships and nine National Collegiate Athletic Association running titles.

But one needn't strive for international achievement in order to gain from exercise. All different types of exercise can be fun, and it all has a positive effect on people's health, especially when paired with healthy eating.

That was the message the two Wisconsin Olympians brought to the Johnson Creek schools Wednesday as part of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's "Movin' and Munchin'" initiative, sponsored by the WEA Trust, a health insurance provider serving many public school employees across the state.

Favor Hamilton and FitzRandolph, both products of Wisconsin's public schools, serve as the honorary co-chairs of the Movin' and Munchin' program.

More than 700 people, including students from pre-kindergartners up through high school seniors, participated in the Olympians' Johnson Creek appearance Tuesday, which challenged everyone to get up and get moving.

The program opened with brief addresses by School District of Johnson Creek Superintendent Mike Garvey and officials from the Movin' and Munchin' program and the WEA Trust, along with a short film showcasing some of the Olympians' achievements.

Then the two athletes came running up from the back of the gym, touching students' outreached hands along the way.

The Olympians each shared a little of their own background while encouraging both students and adults to take up whatever physical activity they find fun.

FitzRandolph, who always has enjoyed getting out in nature, said that he loves Wisconsin's four seasons because there are always different things to do.

He was in kindergarten, inspired by Wisconsin speedskater and five-time Olympic gold medalist Eric Heiden, when he decided to follow in his idol's footsteps.

"My goal was to win an Olympic gold," FitzRandolph recalled.

But even for those who don't want to compete at such a high level in athletics, exercise can make for a richer, longer and more fulfilling life, he advised.

"We don't care what you do," he said. "Just get moving, and munch on healthy foods."

Favor Hamilton said that while she has competed in athletics for a long time, it took her a while to realize that eating healthfully was an important part of the picture, too.

"I could have been such a better athlete if I ate healthy foods," she said, speaking of her early years.

She encouraged the students in the audience to work with their parents to "shop the outside aisles" in the grocery store, where the fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy items can be found, rather than the inner aisles where most of the processed foods hide.

Then for the rest of the hour, the Olympians involved audience members in a number of participatory games centering on physical activity and healthy choices. Elementary students danced; high-schoolers were challenged to a push-up contest, and students of all ages took part in relay races, among many other activities. Nor were the adults immune, as the Olympians pulled up parents, teachers and coaches alike to get them moving.

Finally, everyone in the room was challenged to move all at once, from the twirls of kindergarten girls to the self-conscious hip swings of middle-aged staff members to the frenetic headbanging and antics of the junior high boys.

The Movin' and Munchin' effort goes beyond this single event, too. Local classes can earn free giveaways by participating in "no-soda-for-a-week" pledges and other opportunities.

Superintendent Garvey said that the Johnson Creek district was proud to be able to host the Olympians, saying that the visitors were inspiring and the topic vital to the health of local youngsters.

"The Johnson Creek School District has always placed a large emphasis on exercise, healthy eating and making the right choices," Garvey said. "With childhood obesity becoming epidemic, this is more important now than ever."

The Movin' and Munchin' program is growing all the time, organizers said, with Johnson Creek joining as one of the newest members. The program provides resources for classrooms and for students to take home to their families, encouraging everyday exercises like walking, biking, mowing the lawn or jumpropping as a start. It also challenges families to turn off the TV for a week, choose healthy meals and snacks, and eat together as a family without television.

The effort also provides educators with a forum to share their successes in promoting fitness and healthy eating and award-winning activities might result in grants to the winning school.

More information on the program can be found at movinandmunchin.com.