



Contact:
Ron Harris
Director of Communications
202.683.0182
rjharris@howard.edu

Childhood Obesity

Millions to Watch One D.C. Teen's Effort to Lose Weight

WASHINGTON -- Julia Braxton is an attractive 15-year-old student at Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington. She has a bubbly personality, sings like a bird and wants to be a Broadway performer and an actress.

She is also obese, which does not bode well for her health or her professional aspirations.

So, she and her mother, Terri Braxton, sought out Dr. Denia Tapscott, bariatrician, assistant professor of Medicine at Howard University College of Medicine and program director for the Howard University Hospital Center for Wellness and Weight Loss Surgery.

They want Tapscott to help Julia lose 50 lbs in one year.

In many ways, Julia represents the tens of thousands of American children and teenagers who are overweight, so much so that Type II diabetes caused by obesity is now the number one chronic disease among children.

It is the reason that First Lady Michelle Obama launched Let's Move, an ambitious effort to eliminate childhood obesity within a generation.

But unlike most overweight children, Julia will not struggle in obscurity as she tries to shed pounds. Instead, she and Tapscott's efforts will be profiled six times in EBONY, the nation's premiere African-American oriented magazine.

Kevin Chappell, EBONY senior editor and Washington Bureau chief, will be tracking their successes and possible setbacks. He began in the May 2010 edition of the magazine and will continue with articles in July and in every other month of the publication for the next 12 months.

He will also be writing a number of obesity-related articles. For instance, in July he will be writing about what he calls "food deserts," neighborhoods where healthy foods, like fruits and vegetables, are difficult or impossible to find.

Julia is mindful of all the scrutiny by millions of African-American readers over whether she achieves her goal.

“That’s definitely something that I worry about,” she said. “I try not to see it as an option, though. I *am* going to lose 50 lbs.”

Julia says she is working at eating better and exercising more. She has already seen some success; she is down to 191 pounds from the 212 pounds she started with in December.

“I’m more conscious about my food choices,” said Julia, whose older sister had weight loss surgery to bring down her weight. “I’m cutting down on sugar and fat. I have to give up things like Buffalo wings, pizza, French fries, chocolate candy and Arizona Ice Tea.”

The reasons for Julia’s weight problem are the same for most children, and adults, struggling with obesity -- lack of activity and bad food choices combined with portion control, Tapscott said.

“Physical activity, exercise, it’s not in the school system like it used to be,” Tapscott said. “Too often, today’s children don’t have recess or structured physical activity.

“Kids don’t play outside like they used to, partly because of they are playing on the computer or on video games and sometimes because of their school workload. So, lack of activity is a big part.”

Diet is the other half, Tapscott said. Children are eating too much “junk” food, edibles filled with empty calories, fat and starches.

“Parents in some cases don’t provide nutritious meals, and they also may be eating large portions,” she said. “So, it’s what they’re eating and how much they’re eating.”

She pointed to fast food as a major culprit. They are loaded with calories, fat, sugars and salt.

“Sodas are also a big factor,” she said. “That plays a big role because younger kids would normally drink milk, but they are drinking soda. Yes, milk has calories too, but it also provides nutritional value. Sodas are empty calories.”

If Julia sticks to the structure that she and Tapscott have developed, she should be able to lose 50 pounds in a year, the doctor said.

“It’s a reasonable goal,” she said. “You have to emphasize that you’re doing this over a period of time.”

The tougher challenge, the doctor said, may be keeping the weight off after she has lost it.

“In some cases, maintaining the weight is harder than the weight loss.”