



Photos by Layla Garms

Right: STEPS participants get busy during Hoyatt Allen's kickboxing class Tuesday.

Below: From left: STEPS participants Debbie Thompson, Marcie King, Loris Hines, Jacqueline Bitting and Judy Martin.

Heart health program takes unique STEPS to save lives of black women

BY LAYLA GARMS
THE CHRONICLE

Women in the local African American community are taking "STEPS" to decrease their risk of cardiovascular disease.

STEPS (Sisters Together Empowered for Prevention and Success) to a Healthier Heart is an innovative program led by Winston-Salem State University. It combines awareness initiatives with exercise classes and informational sessions and is targeting African American women between the ages of 35-65. The ultimate goal is for participants to improve their heart health before a major cardiovascular incident takes place.

Over a 12 week period, the project follows women in three cohorts: underserved (or underinsured or uninsured), WSSU faculty and staff and the greater community. Each group is divided into two subgroups. One group participates in hourlong exercise classes twice a week and attends workshops about heart healthy living two times a month.

"We try to make them knowledgeable of what they need to do (to improve their heart health). It goes hand in hand with the programs that we offer," said Marian Booker, community health liaison for the project. "We offer them a variety of different exercises every week - Zumba, kickboxing, we've even done some yoga. It teaches them that exercise can be fun."

The other group acts as the "control," receiving information about heart healthy living, which they are asked to incorporate into their lives on their own. All of the participants are screened at the start and end of the 12 weeks in a variety of areas, from BMI (body mass index) to blood pressure, cholesterol and other related health indicators.

City resident Debbie Thompson and her niece, Debbie King, are both participants in the community cohort. Thompson, a homemaker, said she doesn't have to wait for the exit screening to know her health has improved.

"I love it. It has done a lot for me," the 54 year-old said of STEPS. "I started in April and my blood pressure's gone down considerably."

The project, which was piloted with a group of just under 50 women on campus in 2009, also garnered encouraging results, prompting leaders to seek funding to expand it this year, said Dr. Cynthia Williams Brown, chair of WSSU's Human Performance and Sport Science Department, who created STEPS.

"What we found with that (initial) program was from the first 12 weeks, the women that participated had decreases in their risk factors," explained Brown, who has served at the university for the last 14 years. "It was very successful ... all of the women had some kind of positive change."

This time around, more than 160 women have taken part in STEPS, which is funded by a two-year grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Project leaders hope to reach 350 women by the project's culmination. Among those who have participated so far are three sisters: Jeanette Kelley, Frieda Thompson and Earlyne Martin. Martin is participating in the information group, while Kelley, 63, and Thompson, 51, are participants.

"Our mother had diabetes,



so we're just trying to take care of ourselves," Thompson, an accountant, said of the three sisters' motivation to join the program.

Thompson and Kelley took part in a kickboxing class held at WSSU on Tuesday. Both women say they feel better and eat healthier since starting STEPS.

"It's really a good program, a fantastic program," said Kelley, a retired teacher's assistant for Northwest Child Development. "It teaches us how to eat and what to eat."

King, 46, says she has dropped 10 pounds since starting the project 11 weeks ago. Despite being on disability due

to complications from some old sports injuries, the Surry County native says she stayed active even before joining STEPS, as a member of the local line dancing group the Jazzy Ladies.

"I love to exercise; I love to dance," she declared. "The doctor told me to do as much as I can."

King says the people are the best part of STEPS.

"It's the way they interact with the people. They never judge you, they always try to help you to eat better and to exercise," she said of Booker and Project Coordinator Tarreya Taylor. "They have some good people up here.

They give you a lot of information on everything."

Taylor, a 2011 alumna of Elizabeth City State University, said the relationships the women build through STEPS are an important component of the program.

"We want them to form friendships so that they can exercise outside of the program as well," she explained. "They help each other out."

If the project is successful, it could be a big step in preventing heart disease in local women and beyond, Brown said.

"If we can prove that some of the strategies that we've been using in this program actually work for African American women, then we can seek funding to do it on a larger scale," she said. "Our goal really is sustainability. We try to give women strategies that they can implement after the program ... it's something that they can take with them."

The next STEPS session begins in August. For more information, call 336-750-8915 or email taylor@wssu.edu.

SBC

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tant time for them," Bill Leonard, the James & Marilyn Dunn Chair of Baptist Studies at Wake Forest University, said about Luter's election.

But Leonard believes that the bigger questions are if the organization can diversify its leadership and listen to minority voices after Luter's term ends in two years.

"The real test is not the election," said Leonard. "The real test is if they will be willing to diversify power in the denomination in its board and agencies."

The struggle of SBC to expand its numbers by attracting minorities is shared by many predominately white denominations, according to Leonard, the founding dean of the Divinity School at Wake. The SBC has made progress over the years. Currently, 20 percent of its members are minorities. Local member churches include African-American, Hispanic and Asian congregations and even an Arabic church in Kernersville.

Rev. Eddie Honeycutt, pastor of the largely white First Baptist Church of Stanleyville, said Luter is a good man for the job. During mission trips to New Orleans to help in the aftermath of Katrina, Honeycutt learned how Luter was "doing tremendous things in the community," even when his own church was flooded.

Honeycutt, who has been in SBC ministry for 27 years, said he hoped the election would help disprove notions that the SBC is still a discriminatory organization. He said his own church is reaching out to local Africa American families, some of whom have joined his congregation.

"We're called to reach all people of all nations, and if we're going to do that in all nations, we need to be willing to do that in our neighborhood," said Honeycutt. "...We need to break down barriers and see us all as God's people and work together."

Rev. Reuban Gilliam, who's pastored the predomi-



Revs. Mike and Claire Robinson

nately African-American North Winston Baptist Church since he founded it in 1989, has served on several committees with Luter and knows him well. He said it's taken many years and a lot of work to get Luter elected, but that his presidency definitely shows the SBC is moving in the right direction.

Gilliam said Luter, like President Barack Obama, is the first African American to hold his particular office, but that, like President Obama, Luter was elected because of his abilities, not his skin color.

"He proved himself by doing what other people talk about and putting it into practice," said Gilliam, who believes Luter can attract new congregants to the SBC, which has seen its membership decline for the last five years.

Luter's election is good news to Revs. Mike and Claire Robinson, who co-pastor Redeeming Faith Baptist Church, which is in the process of applying to the SBC.

"I think it's an excellent move to have a minority as head, not just for minorities, but for everybody - he represents everybody," said Mike Robinson, whose fledgling church currently meets at Trinity Glenn nursing home.

The couple said that they were drawn to the SBC partially by its outreach "to all people." They said the election of Luter is a reflection of that.

"Church is not about division it's about diversity, it's about the inclusion of all," said Claire Robinson.

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The Chronicle (USPS 067-910) was established by Ernest H. Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974 and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co. Inc., 617 N. Liberty Street, Winston-Salem, N.C. 27101. Periodicals postage paid at Winston-Salem, N.C. Annual subscription price is \$30.72.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
The Chronicle, P.O. Box 1636
Winston-Salem, NC 27102-1636

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