

## Living Well with a Disability

A Digital Story from the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas

(music in background)

>>Narrator: At age 38, Veronica Thigpen moved into her own apartment for the first time. As a person with an intellectual and physical disability, she faced the challenge of establishing a healthy, independent lifestyle.

Dianne Bradley was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2004. At age 49, she found herself gaining weight due to her medications and was struggling to deal with her illness. She recalls:

>>Diane: "I was secluded in my house and feeling sorry for myself because I have a debilitating illness that won't get better. I felt as though there was no hope."

>>Narrator: Both Veronica and Dianne took part in the Living Well with a Disability workshops sponsored by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the University of Kansas Research and Training Center on Independent Living. These health promotion workshops help people gain knowledge and build the skills for a healthy lifestyle.

>>Narrator: Health is the core foundation that allows people to do the things they value most in life, and Living Well's motto is "People with disabilities CAN be healthy."

But people with disabilities may be the largest underserved and virtually unrecognized subpopulation of Americans who demonstrate evidence of health disparities.

In addition, people with disabilities experience diminished access to healthcare because of barriers related to accessibility, transportation, and the knowledge, attitudes and communication of healthcare providers.

In Kansas, 21 percent of adults live with a disability. From Garden City to Kansas City, from Salina to Parsons, more than 700 Kansans with disabilities have participated in the Living Well program between 2009 and 2012.

Living Well gives participants a comprehensive approach to improving their physical, social and emotional health while reducing their risk factors for disease.

Goal setting and problem solving are presented as the framework for developing healthy habits. The curriculum also covers: healthy reactions, beating the blues, healthy communication, seeking information, physical activity, nutrition, advocacy and maintenance.

Through these workshops participants become empowered to take charge of their own health. They also find an outlet for socialization and a means to escape isolation.

Relationships are developed with the workshop facilitator(s) and other participants. Indeed, participants rank peer support as their favorite outcome of the workshop.

Veronica credits Living Well with helping her reach her goal of independence and learning new, healthier habits. Once in her apartment, she began cooking for herself.

>>Veronica: "I changed all my fried food into baked and broiled food. And I used to eat lots of snacks. I've cut down a whole lot."

>>Narrator: In addition to adding exercise to her routine, she lost weight and her blood pressure decreased significantly.

>>Veronica: "My family is proud of me, because my blood pressure was high and my health was going down."

>>Narrator: Dianne had similar results

>>Dianne: "The class opened me up to other possibilities. I've become more positive and empowered than I have been since I was diagnosed."

>>Narrator: She also lost weight by adding swimming to her routine, and she took on a leadership role after completing the workshop.

She started a Parkinson's disease support group and helps deliver the Living Well with a Disability workshop to new participants.

Most importantly, she gained the power to stay connected. After the workshop, she and several others in the group decided to meet monthly to continue enjoying the peer support.

The Living Well with a Disability Program has trained more than 90 facilitators at 16 community-based disability organizations across Kansas to deliver the workshop.

They brought passion and creativity to helping participants set and meet their goals and reached out to new consumers, such as teens on a tribal reservation.

The participants themselves have had wide-reaching types of success. Anita and Paul Bjorling's group in El Dorado advocated for better sidewalks and access to the city pool for wheelchair users.

John Martinez at Prairie Band Potawatomi Reservation learned to develop new behaviors that would better maintain his health.

Kara Laing in Lawrence learned about healthy eating and now regularly practices making new recipes with a volunteer.

Participants in Kansas City, KS, use the Wii to engage in physical activity that is accessible to people with disabilities.

These personal stories and those of Dianne and Veronica illustrate the ongoing success of the Living Well with a Disability program. As Veronica said,

>>Veronica: "My attitude used to be negative. I've changed my attitude."

*For more information visit [healthequityks.org](http://healthequityks.org) or [rtcil.org](http://rtcil.org).*

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