

OBESITY PREVENTION AND EDUCATION PROFESSOR HAS A NEW RECIPE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

BY SCOTT ROARK



ANN MCDERMOTT wants to teach your children how to cook.

McDermott, an accomplished researcher on nutrition, has come to Cal Poly with a plan to battle the expanding waistlines of youth on the Central Coast, in the state and, ultimately, the nation.

McDermott is the director of Cal Poly's developing Center for Obesity Prevention and Education (COPE), which is focused on positioning Cal Poly as a nationally recognized educational resource for health and obesity-related expertise. COPE is driving an agenda of comprehensive programs to improve cardiovascular health, body composition and mental well-being, promoting a love of physical activity and healthy eating.

COPE has partnered with local businesses and organizations to create "Pink and Dude Chefs," an after-school culinary program for San Luis Obispo County middle school students. The six-week program, led by an inter-disciplinary team of Cal Poly students, promotes knowledge of cooking and healthy food choices, allowing children to use kitchen tools and plan a menu. At the end of the six weeks, students host a "fiesta" and prepare a meal for their friends and family.

"It teaches children how to plan. We are not a society that plans," said McDermott. "We target middle school students, because they can influence their parents and younger siblings. Behavior in middle school predicts behavior in high school."

Many children in this country are at risk because of poor nutrition and exercise, said McDermott. According to one report in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, children today will be the first generation in two centuries whose projected life spans are shorter than their parents because of being obese.

"One study found that 80 percent of the children who were overweight or obese at ages 10 to 15 years were obese adults at age 25 years," said McDermott. "The numbers are alarming to say the least. Children at low socio-economic levels, specifically Hispanics and African-Americans, are particularly at risk."

To compound this, research indicates that most parents don't recognize when their child is overweight. If you don't see the issue, you don't take action, she said.

Another popular COPE after school program is "WHAM!," which introduces middle school girls to fun, life-long, non-competitive activities such as spin, strength training, yoga, Pilates and kick-boxing. It is designed, assessed and evaluated by Cal Poly students.

But these efforts are only the beginning, according to McDermott. COPE is planning a "HANDS on Health Festival," the first annual collaborative Central Coast symposium on health and nutrition on the Cal Poly campus, tentatively scheduled for Oct. 30 and 31. COPE also has spearheaded efforts to bring nationally-renowned speakers to campus. The most recent was Brian Wansink, a national best-selling author and nutrition expert.

McDermott has a doctorate in biochemical nutrition from Tufts University in Massachusetts and completed a fellowship in obesity science and genetics. Before coming to Cal Poly, the lifelong Boston resident worked extensively with research teams and nutrition and exercise intervention studies at Tufts, targeting all ages and health levels. She also had a private clinical practice in Boston, keeping her tuned in to what people think is important, not important or too difficult when it comes to exercise and nutrition.

"Our children's health can be called a national crisis," said McDermott. "COPE is striving to create a model for other nutritional research efforts across the country. Keep your eye on us. This is only the beginning."

COPEING WITH AN EPIDEMIC

