



Healthy Kids Guadalupe County

Katrina Velasquez is busy racking up miles. The first-grader is her family's motivator too, pushing her parents to walk with her on their five-acre property a mile outside of Santa Rosa.

"I think it encourages myself and my husband to get out more," said JoAnn Rivera-Velasquez, Katrina's mom. "You get off work and you're tired, but when you have a 6-year-old saying, 'Come on. Come on,' you're more likely to get out there and do something."

Katrina's interest in walking was sparked by the mileage club at her school, a program that Santa Rosa Elementary School's physical education teacher, Manuel Diaz created to encourage students to move more.

"I've had a lot of feedback from the kids, and they are getting motivated to get outside," said Diaz, who also coaches track, football and baseball. "The more I emphasize it at school, the more it will carry over to the home environment. I feel it's getting the kids motivated."

Children earn toe tokens, incentives for walking a distance that Diaz establishes based on their grade level. Children compete to see who can collect the most brightly-colored tokens, and they string the tiny plastic feet through their shoelaces.

Diaz said he has distributed more than 7,000 toe tokens to about 120 students in grades third through fifth. He has ordered another 7,000 and works weekends to keep up with the growing program. Even though it started as a program during school hours, he said many students bring him notes from their parents to get credit for walking during weekends and after school.

The mileage club, along with the creation of local farmer's market, are projects of the Healthy Kids Healthy Guadalupe County Initiative. The initiative, supported by Healthy Kids New Mexico, is making changes so it is easier for people to choose healthy foods and be physically active.

In northeast New Mexico, about 4,600 people live in Guadalupe County, home to small rural towns like Anton Chico and unincorporated areas like Vaughn. The Pecos River

flows through Santa Rosa, making fishing popular in the county's biggest town. There is one local grocery store there, or people buy food in Edgewood or Las Vegas, both more than an hour away. Growers with big farms take their produce to Las Vegas and Tucumcari, according to Rivera-Velasquez.

For the past 20 years, various organizations have tried to start a farmer's market in Santa Rosa. This time Rivera-Velasquez, who is coordinating the initiative, has approached the set-up differently, involving interested community members and locating the market in a busy location to maximize foot traffic.

To gather interest in the project, Rivera-Velasquez networked through Guadalupe County Health Council members, who helped spread the word and get Rivera-Velasquez in touch with growers and volunteers.

"I think we have more involvement this time than in the past," Rivera-Velasquez said. "We've surveyed farmers in the area to see if they are interested, and we got 10 committed to selling at our market."

The market will be located at the Gazebo in the center of the Santa Rosa business district.

To make it easier for people to choose fruits and vegetables, the farmer's market will include food demonstrations and samples to give people ideas for incorporating the fresh, local produce into their home-cooked meals, said Susan Oviedo, a nurse and nutritionist who works in the Department of Health's Santa Rosa Public Health Office.

The market is a work in progress, and Rivera-Velasquez is talking with growers to find out what they can sell and whether they could experiment with other new foods to have a more comprehensive market. She is also reaching out to surrounding communities to see if growers from Tucumcari, Fort Sumner and Las Vegas may want to sell their locally grown food as well.

To help the market be successful, Rivera-Velasquez is taking advantage of state experts, reaching out to the farmer's market manager in Tucumcari and enlisting the Santa Fe-based Farm to Table nonprofit to increase access to fresh, local food. Farm to Table will help Rivera-Velasquez work with Santa Rosa's grocer, T&D Food Market, to see about selling produce from local farmers at an affordable price at the store. Farm to Table will also be assisting the growers and the Santa Rosa Consolidated Schools to purchase locally grown produce for school meals.

"All of our growers that have big farms are taking produce to Las Vegas or Tucumcari," she said. "They are not staying here to sell produce. The store has expressed interest in selling local food, but cost is the biggest thing."

As Rivera-Velasquez has established committees to help her enhance the health of Guadalupe County, she has found that it's important to keep her group engaged by not overwhelming them with too many meetings.

"That may be part of the reason we weren't successful in the past. If you're just meeting to meet, you lose your people," she said. "Now people are getting excited about the farmer's market, and we haven't even started it yet."

During the summer, the community painted Gutierrez Park in Santa Rosa and will soon hang new signage to encourage families to get out and be active. A small group of community members attended and painted the gazebo; children played games and went home with Frisbees and mini beach balls. Oviedo conducted blood pressure screenings for the adults. The Guadalupe County Health Planning Board provided water, turkey dogs and baked chips as a healthy dinner.

During the Santa Rosa State Park fishing derby event, Rivera-Velasquez set up a booth with information about Healthy Kids Guadalupe County and distributed jump ropes. Again, Oviedo took blood pressure and BMI measurements for both the children and the parents.



In Vaughn, children in the summer youth program painted the park and an event will be held later this month to encourage community usage. The last two park events in Santa Rosa are scheduled for August 20th and 21st. The parks will receive new coats of paint as well as signs, and there will be events for children and blood pressure screenings for adults.

The Anton Chico Park event is scheduled for August 17th and will include a cleanup, painting of equipment, installation of seats for the seesaw, and a slide; all of this equipment was donated to the community. The Renewing the Spirit of Anton Chico group is heading up the project and will be distributing backpacks and school supplies on the day of the event.

Rivera-Velasquez and Joyce Romero with the Santa Rosa Consolidated Schools have been working on updating the school district wellness policy and will be submitting the final copy for approval to the School Health Advisory Committee in September. It will then be handed off to the Superintendent for final approval and implementation.