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Obesity

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Got a News Item?

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Latina mom conquers diabetes for herself, kids and community



Watch the video of Jovita Flores' story, part of the new *Be Well Book* that showcases mothers who help make their families healthier.

Jovita Flores was at her father's hospital bedside as he was dying from complications of diabetes, when he begged her, "Please, take better care of yourself."

Flores, already pre-diabetic, knew it was time to stop this unhealthy legacy.

She trimmed sugar and high-fat foods from her diet, made her Chicago home a "no fry" zone and exercised. She started changing her children's poor eating habits, too. She even hosted fellow moms and talking to them about nutrition and health.

"You have to pay attention to your health every single day," Flores said. "My father made me realize that your health is the most important thing in life. I want to pass on the message that he gave me."

Flores' [story](#) is one of many mothers,

including several Latinas, featured in the new *Be Well Book from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation*.

The book showcases moms working to establish life-long, healthy habits in their kids with the hope that their stories will inspire other parents. It is available free [online](#).

Flores' plan for a healthy family didn't happen overnight.

As she taught her kids to find healthy ingredients in menu labels, she began making small changes in the food she served them, like using wheat pasta, adding flax seed to breakfast shakes or swapping in soy patties instead of beef hamburgers.

"Kids will eat what you serve them," she said. "There shouldn't be any other choice but what the mother serves."

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Director's Corner

Letter to members from Dr. Amelie Ramirez

Childhood obesity, beware.

More and more each day, I hear about new programs and ventures to reduce or prevent childhood obesity, especially among Latino kids.

First Lady Michelle Obama's **efforts** to address childhood obesity could have a **focus** on underserved kids. Marisa Treviño, author of the Latina Lista blog, in a recent *USA Today* opinion **column**, urged Obama's program to be comprehensive and offer materials in Spanish and involve Latino research groups like *Salud America!*

One of my colleagues at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio, Dr. Deborah Parra-Medina, has received TV **coverage** of her new project that has Girl Scouts – particularly Latina girls ages 11 to 14 – take photos and notes to document what makes it easy, or hard, to be active in their neighborhoods.

Dr. Parra-Medina and her team then will design an



Ramirez

intervention to get girls to change sedentary behaviors and get more active.

We're also excited by the progress being made by our 20 *Salud America!* **grantees** and are looking forward to seeing how their research findings impact obesity prevention policies at the family, school and community levels.

There's so much great progress that it's getting harder to stay on top of it all.

In fact, when we first started our monthly E-alert in 2008, the first few issues had only a few Latino-focused news or research items. Now we're running out of room.

And we couldn't be happier about it!

As always, please be sure to frequently check our **Web site** for updates on our and **others'** efforts to address Latino childhood obesity.

Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H.

Director, *Salud America!*

Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio



News Briefs

Salud America! membership number rises

The number of *Salud America!* members has grown to 1,575 as of April 2010, up from about 1,300 a year ago and 700 two years ago. We are gaining new members every day, and we urge you to invite colleagues to join, as well as others you may know who are interested in addressing the problem of obesity among Latino children. Join the network [here](#).

Salud America! survey to be featured in journal article

A scientific article on the *Salud America!* Delphi survey, which helped identify the key research Latino childhood obesity priorities that guided the selection of our 20 pilot investigators, has been accepted for publication in the journal *Health Education & Behavior*. The article, "Salud America! Developing a National Latino Childhood Obesity Research Agenda," described the *Salud America!* Delphi survey process, findings and implications for the research field. An executive summary of the Delphi can be found [here](#).

Blog on Latino health, childhood obesity

In late 2009, the team behind *Salud America!* launched a **blog**, called SaludToday, focusing on Latino child and adult health, including Latino cancer, childhood obesity and other key topics.



Funding Opportunities

NIH Grants

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) compiles a wide variety of obesity-related research funding **opportunities** that are currently seeking applications.

Health Eating Research Grants

Healthy Eating Research, an RWJF national program, is seeking **proposals** for research to promote healthy eating among children to prevent childhood obesity, especially among low-income and racial and ethnic populations. Applications are due May 13, 2010.

Local Funding Partnerships

The RWJF Local Funding Partnerships (LFP) program seeks to unite RWJF and local grantmakers to fund promising, original projects that can significantly improve the health of vulnerable populations. **Applications** are due June 30, 2010.

Stepping Up Against Latino Childhood Obesity

San Antonio schools add healthier food items without jeopardizing budget

The Southwest Independent School District in San Antonio, a largely Latino city, has successfully increased the number of fruits, vegetables and whole grains served to students without negatively impacting the district's budget.

With business and restaurant experience under their belts, Child Nutrition Director Winston Gatlin and Assistant Director Scott Stephens started by reaching out to the district's cafeteria managers to involve them in the menu planning process.

The cafeteria managers boosted the amount of fruit they provide by augmenting their Chef Salad, which had tomatoes and cucumbers, with a half-cup of canned fruit.

A transition from white to whole-wheat breads also went smoothly.

And, after years of observing student purchasing and eating behaviors, the group noticed that students were more interested in the entrée choice than the side offerings. Therefore, they found that removing unhealthy side items and desserts and replacing them with fruit was an easy switch, too.

Pizza was more challenging because "harvest grain" pizza looked vastly different than what students had been used to. So the school worked with its vendor to find a healthier pizza that looked more like traditional pizza. Students have returned to the new, healthier pizza line.

The district's efforts were recently recognized as a success **story** by the



Southwest Independent School District, aided by high-school cafeteria manager Janie Herrera (pictured), added healthier menu items for students.

Alliance for a Healthier Generation. And how did these changes impact the district's budget?

"By utilizing our commodity foods to the fullest, we have been able to provide the students of Southwest ISD a nutritious meal that fits well within the parameters of our budget," Stephens said. "Since all the changes were gradual and we have not seen any drop off in sales, I guess the kids don't mind!"

Salud America! NAC

Elva Arredondo
Marice Ashe
Laura Brennan
► **Nancy Butte**
Anna Díez-Roux
Robert Garcia
Lawrence Green
Robin Hamre
Terry Huang
Barbara Israel
Laura Kettel Khan
Judith Ottoson
Frank Penedo
Charlotte Pratt
Maya Rockeymoore
James Sallis
Randy Schwartz
Mary Story
Elsie Taveras
Mildred Thompson
Amy Lazarus Yaroch

Meet the National Advisory Committee (NAC)

At 3:04 a.m. February 4, 1976, a 7.5-magnitude earthquake rocked Guatemala, killing and injuring thousands, leaving millions homeless and burying food stores.

Nancy Butte, startled but unhurt by the quake, knew what to do.

Butte, a Peace Corps volunteer who at the time was stationed at Guatemala's Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama, capitalized on her fledgling experience as a nutritionist to set up soup kitchens and coordinate food service at camps for quake victims, a much-needed effort in the disaster response.

"My time in the Peace Corps showed me the importance of public health and care," said Butte,

who went on to get degrees in nutritional sciences. "Ever since then, I've strived to improve the health of children through research, education and advocacy."

Dr. Butte has built a strong career in child health and nutrition as an educator and investigator on the Baylor College of Medicine faculty since 1982.

Her research focuses on the environmental and genetic determinants of childhood obesity. She also examines the contribution of food intake, total energy expenditure, basal metabolic rate, substrate utilization, physical activity, and fitness on obesity in children, especially Latinos.

In one of her studies she will test the efficacy of a community-centered childhood weight management program among



Nancy Butte



Nancy Butte (center) supervises dry food distribution at a Guatemalan hamlet after an earthquake in 1976.

ethnically diverse children.

Butte says it takes a multi-level approach to respond to childhood obesity, just as disaster aid also must occur on many levels.

"Addressing socioeconomic barriers at the family, school and community level to healthcare, education, healthy diet and recreation would go a long way to reducing childhood obesity among Latinos," she said.

Grantee Corner

Meet Salud America! Grantee Shari Barkin



Shari Barkin was accepted by The Washington Ballet, a company recognized internationally for its high standards and artistic integrity, then joined a traveling jazz company, dancing in front of thousands.

She even got to Broadway, dancing in New York after her freshman year in college.

But one morning her sophomore year, she awoke and couldn't move her legs. She was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, in which the body's immune system attacks part of the peripheral nervous system, causing varying degrees of leg weakness.

She was hospitalized for three weeks and realized a dance career was too risky – but a new career option quickly arose.

“My medical care, while competent, was not compassionate, comprehensive or clear. When I had recovered, I went back to that same floor and volunteered. I wanted to listen to patients and help them find their voice to ensure they could get what they needed,” said Barkin, who went on to get medical and public health degrees. “This experience not only shaped my career choice but shaped how I view the world.”

Barkin is now the chief of the Division of General Pediatrics at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, which aims to provide high-quality clinical service to a largely underserved population, teach learners of all disciplines, conduct research that improves child health outcomes and advocate for children and families to sustain improved health.

She's also one of 20 pilot researchers whose project was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

She will assess the impact recreational facilities' policies

Like many young girls, Shari Barkin wanted to be a Broadway dancer.

So she practiced rigorously—two hours every morning before school—and put together a strong résumé as a professional ballerina.

At age 16 she



Dr. Barkin's *Salud America!* pilot research project involves physical activities for Latino kids at recreation centers in Nashville, Tenn.

and programs have on physical activity among Latino families in Nashville, Tenn., in particular whether use of the local *Salud Con La Familia* program has changed how active families are.

Salud Con La Familia teaches families with children ages 3 to 5 how best to utilize community recreation centers and incorporate physical activity into their parenting. Barkin's evaluation will assess perception of recreation center staff regarding park access and use by Latino families, as well as what 100 Latino parent-

child pairs report regarding their access to and use of Nashville's 23 recreation centers, compared to control families.

“We hope to collect compelling data to influence sustainable policy change,” she said, “and implement a framework for developing program standards in recreation centers.”

Why is Barkin so interested in Latino childhood obesity?

She saw it first-hand during her time at a North Carolina clinic that predominantly served Latinos.

“I could see that the rate of Latino childhood obesity was skyrocketing, yet it appeared to be almost invisible to my patient-families,” Barkin noted. “This spurred questions like: Why was it increasing so quickly? Why didn't my patient-families see it? Feel it?”

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Grantee Corner

Meet *Salud America!* Grantee Zan Gao



Zan Gao

Don't many people blame video games for kids' couch-potato ways, which are contributing to high rates of childhood obesity?

Zan Gao thinks a video game can be part of the solution.

Thanks to *Salud America!* funding, Gao is pilot-testing how *Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)*, a video game that has players stomp on a dance mat to mimic the steps of an on-screen dancer boogieing to

ultra-cool music, impacts Latino students' physical activity, fitness and academic performance in Utah schools.

"We chose *DDR* because it is considered culturally sensitive to urban Latino children, who favor playing video games," said Gao, an assistant professor of exercise and sports science at the University of Utah. "The kids are very excited about *DDR* and, most importantly, are active when playing it."

Gao is one of 20 pilot researchers whose project was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

Gao's project is based on his earlier program that offered *DDR* after school and during recess at the urban Rose Park Elementary School, whose enrollment is 73 percent Latino immigrants with low socioeconomic status and high obesity rates.

Now he will conduct a study that will have 200 Rose Park students either play *DDR* for 60 minutes twice a week or have that time as free play.

Then he will:

- assess and compare the two groups over two years;
- measure student physical activity levels, health-related physical fitness levels and students' grades in reading and math; and
- interview participants about the experience.

"We want to help our leaders identify and implement appropriate intervention programs to reverse obesity among urban Latino school children," Gao said.

In Utah, Gao teaches courses on motor development and middle-school P.E. education instruction, and he conducts obesity research using school-based physical activity interventions. He also works with local teachers to promote urban kids' physical fitness.



Dr. Gao's *Salud America!* pilot research project uses the *Dance Dance Revolution* video game to increase Latino kids' physical activity.

But why is he so interested in childhood obesity research among minorities?

That'd be thanks to his graduate mentor at Louisiana State University, Dr. Louis Harrison Jr. Gao, who went to LSU in 2003 to earn a PhD in kinesiology after graduating from Beijing Sport University and working as a reporter at Chinese Sport Daily, loved Dr. Harrison's seminars

on diversity issues in sports and physical activity, and worked with him on several projects.

Then, while a volunteer instructor for a local youth physical activity program, Gao was amazed at the extremely high overweight and obesity rates he saw among ethnically diverse children.

"I decided to help underserved children develop a physically active and healthy lifestyle," Gao said.

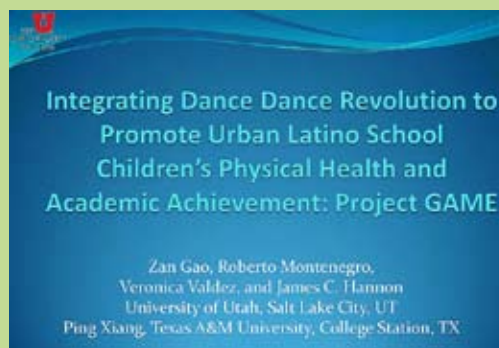
After moving to Salt Lake City in 2007, he and a student partnered to help start a physical activity program at Rose Park. They decided *DDR* would be a good tool.

When Gao first tried the game, he said he did OK. With more practice, he was able to dance to songs with increasingly difficult steps. He said he needs to be good at the game – know it inside out.

"Sometimes the kids challenged me. They were really excited when they beat me on a song," he said.

If the kids are beating Gao at *Dance Dance*, they're starting to beat obesity, too.

View a slideshow of Dr. Gao's project



Research**Promotoras can help Latino parents slim their kids' obesity risk**

Latino parents aided by a promotora reported more-frequent monitoring of their child's diet and physical activity, use of positive reinforcement, and instrumental support for physical activity, according to a new [study](#) by San Diego State University researchers.

These parents also authorized fewer food purchases away from home and less TV-watching at dinner.

The study, published in the February 2010 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, examined data from *Aventuras para Niños*, which studied 811 predominantly Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American mothers with children in kindergarten through second grade in Southern California.

Some of the mothers received home visits by a *promotora* (a trained community health worker) and monthly newsletters over several months to promote and reinforce parenting behaviors and child eating and activity behaviors.

At a two-year follow-up, significant improvements were observed in three of five parenting strategies, parental support, and two of four parent-mediated family behaviors among parents who got print materials and *promotora* visits, compared with those in the overall *Aventuras para Niños* intervention and those in a control condition.

"Promotoras can successfully improve several dimensions of parenting," according to study authors, which include *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee members Drs. Guadalupe Ayala and Elva Arredondo. "These findings are encouraging because they suggest that a promotora-mediated intervention can improve several dimensions of parenting that are associated with a child's risk for obesity."



Guadalupe Ayala



Elva Arredondo

**Research Briefs****County health rankings**

The health status of nearly every one of the nation's more than 3,000 counties, and the factors that contribute to it, are ranked in a recent [report](#), *County Health Rankings: Mobilizing Action Toward Community Health*.

Hispanic mothers more likely to breastfeed

More than 80 percent of Hispanic mothers attempt to breast-feed, a higher rate than among white moms (74 percent) and black moms (54 percent), according to a [HealthDay article](#) about a study in the *Morbidity*

and *Mortality Weekly Report* by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The American Academy of Pediatrics currently recommends that babies be breast-fed exclusively for the first six months of life, and that non-exclusive breast-feeding continue for at least six months thereafter.

Hispanic, black children lack enough Vitamin D

Vitamin D deficiency is a common health problem around the world, experts say, and the problem may be especially severe in the U.S. among low-income black and Hispanic children, [HealthDay reports](#). The article reported on a recent study finding that about 74 percent of these children had less than optimal vitamin D levels.

Policy Corner

Special edition of journal examines how food systems affect public health

As part of its work to identify policy and environmental solutions to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) sponsored the conference *Food Systems and Public Health: Linkages to Achieve Healthier Diets and Healthier Communities*, held in Arlie, Va.

The meeting was organized to identify policy and environmental strategies that could help support healthier diets based on sustainably produced foods.

A special **issue** of the *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* explores these issues from the perspectives of leaders in varied disciplines, sectors and nations.

Some of the articles included in the issue are:

- Food Systems and Public Health: Linkages to Achieve Healthier Diets and Healthier Communities
- Principles for Framing a Healthy Food System



- Food Systems and Public Health Disparities
- Agriculture Policy Is Health Policy

The special issue was sponsored and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, RWJF, Kaiser Permanente, the David and Lucile Packer Foundation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Minnesota School of Public Health, Michigan State University and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.



Policy News Briefs

RWJF Center highlights federal policy issues

The RWJF Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity sends weekly email updates on policy and legislative issues and federal agency news. To learn more about the Center, visit its Web [site](#). Click on “Stay Informed” to sign up for the email updates. The Center also aims

to keep people up to date on new legislation [here](#).

The Surgeon General's Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation

The office of the U.S. Surgeon General recently released a [report](#), *The Surgeon General's Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation*, with

data and analysis provided by the National Center for Health Statistics. Substantial scientific input was also provided by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. Technical and editorial support was also provided by numerous U.S. Department of Health and Human Services subject matter experts.

Latina mom beats diabetes

► Continued from page 1

Her kids even started to like the meals better than the old ones. As he began to lose weight, her oldest requested even healthier meals.

Once her family was on the right track, Flores began gathering groups of parents and talking to them about nutrition. Soon she was teaching several health and cooking classes around her neighborhood. She's now made this work her career as a staff member at the Chicago Healthy Schools Project, where she teaches healthier eating.

"You just have to stick with it," she said. "Little by little your body will change a lot."



Meet grantee Shari Barkin

► Continued from page 4

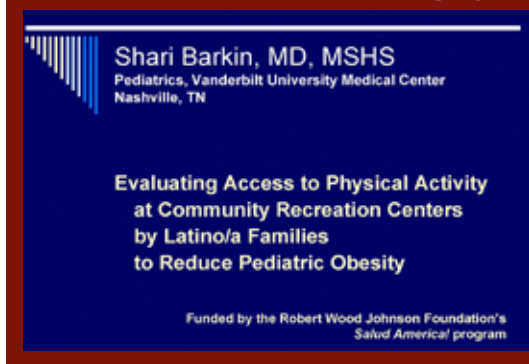
She and her research team now study family-based, community-centered clinical interventions to change health behaviors in parent-child dyads, focusing on changing kids' body mass index trajectories at critical points in development.

Barkin is quite a research success, even though it wasn't her childhood dream.

"My experience after professional

dance set me on a new path and awakened the inner advocate in me. Here I was a young adult unable to take care of my basic needs, dependent on others, and most of the medical staff was too busy to work with a sense of diligence and compassion," Barkin said. "It made me realize there are tremendous opportunities to contribute effectively to humanity – whether it's one person, system or policy at a time."

See a slideshow of Dr. Barkin's project



About the E-newsletter

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Salud America! is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to unite and increase the number of Latino scientists engaged in research on childhood obesity among Latinos to seek environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. For more information, [click here](#). To learn more about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's efforts to combat childhood obesity, [click here](#).

Kids' Health Q&A

Question: How do *Salud America!* grantee Shari Barkin and her husband keep her three kids active and eating healthy?

"We have three kids: Ben (12), Cora (10) and Liam (6). If you give kids unstructured play time that does not include any type of media, physical play comes naturally and often. My kids have learned how to be intelligent media users—none during the week and up to two hours on the weekend. They often comment on commercials and what the intention of the commercial



is: "Wow, they are trying to make that food look really good, but it isn't healthy for you."

My husband is the good cook in the family (I'm good at slicing vegetables and making salad). He prepares healthy options and we have clear times when we all sit down to eat together.

The dinner table is our television. It is our entertainment, sharing stories, telling jokes.

We could stay there for a long time. And the best part is that there are no commercials."