

BODY *FITNESS & TRAINING*
MECHANICS
954-749-8558

*"Taking Your Fitness
to the Next Level"*



IN THE NEWS : Monday, 15 December 2008

The Miami Herald 

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SHAKE-UP: Rosangela Ridgewell teaches a belly dancing class to drivers.

A year ago, a group of Broward school bus drivers might have spent the hours between morning and afternoon bus routes sitting at a district transportation center, watching television and eating fast food.

The result was a lot of overweight drivers with dangerously high blood pressure.

'You have a tendency to get that -- I call it the `steering wheel gut,' " veteran bus driver Cheryl Montgomery said.

But now, they are slimming down -- and getting healthier -- with weekly workouts that include body sculpting, hip-hop and belly dancing.

Federal transportation rules say bus and truck drivers can't get behind the wheel if their blood pressure gets too high. When it stays at a high level, drivers are in danger of having a heart attack or stroke, a condition the school district can't risk with the men and women charged with getting thousands of children safely to and from school every day.

Over the last year, the international pharmaceutical company Novartis gave the school district blood pressure testing machines, dietary lessons and workout plans for the drivers as part of a national program -- called Blood Pressure Downshift.

And recently, Broward school employees with district health insurance became entitled to free gym memberships.

The combination inspired the bus drivers to ask the district if they could use a school bus to carpool to a gym once or twice a week.

The district agreed, in the hopes the cost would be offset by fewer claims and medical expenses.

Drivers have been on the move ever since.

The results have been phenomenal -- so many Broward school bus drivers lowered their blood pressure -- that the results have been submitted to a medical journal for publication.

Stephanie Shorr, co-owner of Body Mechanics gym in Lauderhill, has noticed how much the drivers have changed in just a year.

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"They're all moving a lot faster. They're all excited," Shorr said. "They've changed from cooking sausage. Now it's salads."

Shorr and co-owner Tony Ferguson go to the bus compound to lead the drivers in weekly exercises. They organized competitions in the style of TV's *Biggest Loser*.

And the drivers also come to the gym, where they start off their hourlong workouts with some cardio.

On a recent week, they tackled belly dancing, swaying their hips from side to side and waving their arms as instructor Rosangela Ridgewell guided them through the movements. They laughed and sweated as they burned calories, then spent another half-hour lifting weights.

The risk of high blood pressure worsens with age and obesity, lack of exercise and high-sodium diet, and genetics can play a role.

For bus drivers, the job only worsens any health problems they might already have.

"We are constantly sitting down. We don't have time to eat -- we eat on the road," said 20-year driver Mary Grisham. She starts her day at 5 a.m. and drives until 10 a.m. Then she's back on the road from 1:30 to 5 p.m.

And for many drivers, for whom the starting salary is about \$17,000 a year, until gym memberships became a part of their benefits, paying for them on their own was out of the question.

For a time, Grisham's blood pressure was higher than federal rules allow, keeping her out of the driver's seat. The district had to fill her route with another transportation department staffer.

Not anymore.

"They've lost weight and they're coming to work more," said Fernando Staple, a transportation manager. Novartis said 208 drivers signed up for the program, and most kept up with it for the duration of the study. Average blood pressure dropped from a dangerous 145 over 87 to an improved 135 over 82.

Before the study started, only 40 percent of Broward's drivers involved in the program had their blood pressure below the federal Transportation Department's requirements. After the study, 60 percent were in the safe range.

"This is going to reduce claims in the long run," said Tina Severance-Fonte, a district wellness coordinator who has driven school buses in the past.

While blood pressure medicine may not be terribly expensive, the district would rather not pay for emergency room visits or bypass surgery, she said, so they have every incentive to get employees healthy.

After one recent workout, drivers piled back onto the bus, checking their watches. They heckled the stragglers. Urging them to get a move-on, Montgomery cried: "We're not going to have time for our grapefruit juice."