Service spotlight: Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago

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Obesity and physical inactivity are serious health concerns globally, and my birth nation of Trinidad and Tobago is no exception. Thirty per cent of adults have been diagnosed with obesity, the highest rates in the Caribbean and rates of obesity and overweight among school-aged children more than quadrupled between 2001 and 2018. Only 20.3% of secondary school-aged children are physically active for an hour a day, with 51.8% spending 3 or more hours every day being sedentary. To help secure a healthier future for my young people and country, I founded Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago, a non-profit organisation to develop a fun movement-based programme pairing students with community running mentors to train for the Trinidad and Tobago International Marathon Schools Relay. This race currently attracts hundreds of students from across the country to each run the 2.2-mile circumference of the Queens’ Park Savannah in a 6-person baton relay.

COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL RESOURCES AND LEADERSHIP

Though there have been post-colonial changes to our pedagogy nationally and regionally that make our education system uniquely and culturally ours, our country has generally maintained the British structure for primary and secondary school public education, based on age and academic achievement. As with many stratified institutions, disparities between schools have developed over the years. My alma mater, Bishop Anstey High School (BAHS), boasts exceptional music, arts, foreign language, science, business and sporting programmes. Local and international alumnae readily endow the school financially and in service. The St. Ann’s/Cascade Servol Junior Life Centre, just 1.8 miles away from BAHS, was established for students who did not perform as well academically to build literacy, numeracy, and esteem, “reconnecting people to their potential.” Servol thrives strongly on the benevolence of its devoted Board of Directors and donor partners. While the institution may not be as tangibly resource rich as BAHS, their students are citizens of purpose and worth.

ALL CHILDREN DESERVE A CHANCE TO BE THEIR HEALTHIEST AND HAPPIEST SELVES

After completion of my Sports Medicine Fellowship in July 2016, I returned home to Trinidad on a 6-week sabbatical. That was the ultimate training experience for my medical career, and I was finally able to dedicate the time and knowledge to fully give back to a nation that had invested in my education and upbringing. When I met with the Trinidad and Tobago Olympic Committee (TTOC) regarding national team physician service, I also proposed Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago, and received invaluable feedback on strategic planning, successful execution and sustainability of the programme from then TTOC President Mr. Brian Lewis. He connected me with leaders in the local sporting ecosystem, such as the marathon committee President and now TTOC President Ms. Diane Henderson, who suggested St. Ann’s/Cascade Servol Junior Life Centre as a programme site. The principal of Servol, Osavia Toussaint, welcomed us with open arms, expressing a need for more consistent structured physical and health education initiatives for the students. It is from this jewel of a school that our programme now exists.

I brought my ideas to my former high school classmate Ivory Hayes, MPH a certified Health Coach and Personal Trainer. Ivory immediately jumped on board to join forces and developed a health education curriculum to engage and empower students to place their health as a top priority in keeping with our programme’s mission.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE AND THE PROGRAMME’S EXPANSION

In our pilot year of 2016, we had six students from the school under the mentorship of running coach Mr. Anton LaFond and performance and athletic development specialist Mr. Gregory Seale. Most students could barely jog a half-mile. In just under 6 months, through a biweekly after-school progressive running programme and Saturday sessions at Movement Mechanics, Mr. Seale’s clinic for personal training in strength, conditioning and performance, they were each able to run 4.35 miles as a relay leg of the full Marathon, predating the inception of the Schools’ Relay in 2019. Their success led to engagement of other schools in Port-of-Spain and environs, including BAHS. We now have 8 programme sites, with over 80 students participating in the programme. Our team from St. Francis Boys’ College placed third in 2019 and won the marathon relay race in 2020!

Since its inception, Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago has provided services to the students through personal funds and the benevolence of family members, friends and local companies such as El Pecos restaurant and Lifestyle Motors. In 2023, Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago received the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine Global Humanitarian Service Project grant. In addition to our usual mass preparticipation examination, and empirical assessment of student health profiles and physical activity attitudes and participation, this award allows us to expand our provision of free race registration, running gear, sports bras, training equipment, hydration and nourishment to students, and provide a stipend to a local programme coordinator. This year, we will have our first intramural Sports Day based on the five tenets of physical fitness (body composition, flexibility, muscular endurance, muscular strength, and cardiovascular endurance) to promote healthy competition and camaraderie across the school-based teams, and an organisation-wide community service event.

BRIGHTER FUTURES FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

The vision to eliminate childhood obesity remains our top priority. We are building a repository of data on childhood obesity, creating templates for efficacious school-based and...
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community-based interventions, and developing a research infrastructure to monitor outcomes. Additionally, other opportunities have also evolved. Participants have received Athletics scholarships to the US to further their education, a student changed her career trajectory to Sports Medicine after the 2020 race, and two students from the original Servol cohort became running mentors themselves. We hope to expand Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago to provide connections to sponsors for races and other fitness events, and conduct health education workshops and preparticipation screenings for any school or community youth running group in need across the nation.

Most importantly, Run For Life Trinidad and Tobago has become a hub for volunteerism and engagement and an opportunity to positively impact the children of our community. For more information, contact Dr. Nailah Adams Morancie at Nailah_Adams@med.unc.edu.

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