

# You can make a difference

## *Moving Grays Harbor*

By Maryann Welch

“Harborites smoke too much, eat too much, and don’t get enough physical activity. The list can go on and on. If you look at numbers from around the state on all public health issues, Grays Harbor is consistently near the top (if not number 1) in all categories of harmful health behaviors. We are killing ourselves, and we don’t seem to be able to make significant progress toward healthier behaviors.”

The above paragraph is in quotes because I wrote those words in this column almost 4 years ago. Now another study has been released that classifies Grays Harbor as one of the unhealthiest counties in the state. Joan Brewster, the Public Health Director for the County recently focused on the ways that the ratings can be improved upon through a combination of individual, organizational and policy involvement. I wholeheartedly concur with Joan’s points and would encourage everyone to get involved at some level.

Personally, I see the very low ratings of health in Grays Harbor as something we should definitely be ashamed of. I am usually a cheerleader for Grays Harbor, but the results of this study gave me pause. In my experience, many Harborites react to such news in a fatalistic way similar to some of the media headlines – “Where you live determines how healthy you are.” We can all shrug and submit to the idea that Grays Harbor will always score in the bottom when it comes to health

status. Therefore, if we live in Grays Harbor we are destined to be unhealthy!??

Can’t we just attribute the grim statistics to a perennially low economy and high unemployment here in Grays Harbor? Well, I claim that to be the easy way out. The surveys and statistics that result in the low rankings count up one person at a time for the final tally. Sure, policies and infrastructure can make it easier to be active or to eat more nutritious food. BUT, the reality of statistics should make each one of us stop in our tracks to evaluate what steps and changes we can make for ourselves and our families that can ultimately paint a healthier picture for the Harbor.

Tobacco users impact the grim statistics in many ways. There are resources to assist in tobacco cessation and all of us need to encourage and support anyone we know that makes the difficult and courageous decision to stop. One person at a time the Harbor’s rate of tobacco can be reduced, resulting in many more health improvements at the same time.

In this column I have highlighted numerous local resources that can drive positive changes in health behaviors. On a recent sunny, balmy Saturday – yes, in March – my daughter and I rode our bikes for over an hour on the pathway from Cosmopolis to the Bishop Athletic Complex. During that time we encountered only a handful of people using the trail even given the t-shirt weather. Building such infrastructure doesn’t automatically improve health for Grays Harbor – it takes the decisions of each of us to take advantage and reap the benefits.

As you read this article I hope that you might be thinking of little changes you can start to make and I’d like to throw out this challenge: be more proactive

with what you and yours eat whether at home, work, or school. Think about what you can do to provide a nutritious meal. What unhealthy habits can you change? Ask yourself some tough questions: Do you really need a dessert, coffee drink, energy drink or soda every day? What about physical activity? Can you set aside just 10 minutes every day this week to improve your fitness? Go for a walk on a break, pull some weeds, shoot hoops with the kids, just find something that makes you move and enjoy it.

We are all faced with choices every day – especially as related to what we eat and what we do. Make the choice to be pro-health and you will undoubtedly reap the rewards. Your personal benefit will also contribute to a brighter picture of health for the County!

One healthy decision at a time, one person at a time, **WE CAN** impact some positive movement in our county's health statistics!

*Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.*

*If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at [moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us](mailto:moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us) or visit our web site at [www.healthygh.org](http://www.healthygh.org).*