Pinjarra Women enjoy the benefits of swapping

If you hear the sound of South American music floating through Pinjarra on a Monday morning, you can bet that some local women are having a ball while getting fit.

The Columbian dance-fitness craze called Zumba, practised by Hollywood stars such as Jennifer Lopez and Halle Berry, has become part of a new weekly routine for a group of Aboriginal women from Pinjarra seeking a healthier lifestyle. Besides Zumba, they’re also taking nutrition classes and walks, and while they’re learning about the benefits of exercise and good nutrition they’re making new friends.

Fifteen local women are taking part in the Bindjareb Yorgas Health Program, named after the Bindjareb Indigenous people of the Peel Region (yorgas translates as women). The program is sponsored by the Swap It, Don’t Stop It campaign, funded by the Federal Government and administered in WA by the Heart Foundation. Launched in March last year, the campaign aims to provide Australians with the tools and understanding to make healthy lifestyle choices by swapping bad habits for good ones.

It started mid-September 2012 and centres on the MOAS facility at Pinjarra Primary School where the Zumba dance classes are held every Monday morning. “It’s been really successful and we’ve had a sustained attendance, which obviously means they enjoying it,” said program co-ordinator Caroline Nilson. “And it’s also given them a good sense of woman-ship, if you like.” Mrs Nilson, a lecturer at the school of nursing and midwifery at Murdoch University’s Peel Campus, devised the 12-week program in conjunction with the Murray District Aboriginal Association’s chairperson, Karrie-Anne Kearing. “These classes are very popular and we’ve been lucky enough to have Jemma Hahn, a local and trained Zumba instructor, to lead the group,” Mrs Nilson said. “The music and the movement get them going and they just love to dance.”

MOAS also hosts Wednesday nutrition classes which teach such topics as reading food labels to check things like sugar, salt and fat levels, as well as cooking lessons and how to construct healthy shopping lists. Friday mornings are set aside for walks. “We walk between 30 and 45 minutes, mostly along the Murray River, and children are encouraged to come to make it easier for their mothers to attend,” Mrs Nilson explained. “I encourage those on the program to do things like ‘swap deep fries for oven wedges’ and ‘swap fried for fresh’. For walking, I’ll say, ‘let’s swap sitting and watching for walking and talking’.”

Ms Kearing said: “It’s great that we’re getting Aboriginal
people meeting in a healthy way. Some of the recipes we've been learning we've taken to the school where we cook with kids, and they're enjoying eating them — it's surprised me. I think it starts with the parents; when the parents start enjoying eating healthy, it spreads to the kids. Like walking — that becomes a family thing." She said a couple of the participants were proud of the fact they'd lost a couple of kilos in weight. Plus, they all enjoyed the program's social aspects. "Instead of sitting at home by yourself, you get in with a group your own age and get talking — it helps your mental state as well," she added.

The primary target group of Swap It, Don't Stop It is the 25-50 year-old age group, particularly those with children, those with low socio-economic and non-English speaking backgrounds, and Indigenous people outside Metropolitan Perth. Heart Foundation senior project officer Lisa Wheatley said the campaign encouraged people to consider small swaps involving nutrition and physical activity. These could be incorporated into daily life and would have the potential to help reduce the risk factors of chronic disease.

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