

Local Walking Clubs Promote Individual, Community Health



Moderate walking for 30 minutes a day or three hours a week may cut your risk of heart disease, fight depression, promote weight loss and boost the immune system. The photograph of the North Long Beach Walking Club is by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville.

■ By **TIFFANY RIDER**
Staff Writer

Most physicians agree that 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day can vastly improve a person's overall health. But a lack of motivation or encouragement to move and break a sweat can sometimes impede the process.

Residents of Long Beach and the surrounding area are providing such encouragement to each other to achieve health and fitness through walking clubs, which are open to all ages.

Bixby Knolls Strollers

Blair Cohn, the executive director of the Bixby Knolls Business Improvement Association (BKBIA), started the Bixby Knolls Strollers walking club three years ago, inviting business owners, friends and family from the neighborhood for an hour of walking.

The club meets every Saturday morning at 7:30 a.m. at It's A Grind Coffeehouse, 4245 Atlantic Ave., and each weekend the route is different. "This was the first new program I started as a way to bring people together to literally walk them up and down the business corridors and into the neighborhoods to 're-introduce' their own areas to them," Cohn said. "Slowing things down

to a walk allows for more things to be seen and discovered." Routes are typically 3.7 to 3.9 miles.

The club has attracted as many as 60 participants and averages between 25 and 40 walkers each week. Over the past three years, the BKBIA estimates the Strollers have walked 575 miles – the equivalent of about 22 marathons. "People are very comfortable with the group and you are encouraged to walk with people at your own pace," Cohn said. The group has fostered a new sense of fitness in several participants, including Deborah Hill.

Hill had struggled with her weight until she discovered the walking club as a way to stay healthy while having fun, and now she recommends it to her family and friends. "They taught me how to reclaim something that I thought I had lost, something that goes way beyond reclaiming my inner athlete," she said.

At the time she joined the Strollers, Hill said she was motivated by Cohn's father, Gordon, who, at 77 years old ran a 5K and finished in the top six. "He just kept me motivated and pushing me to reach my goal," she said. "I knew that [through] this walking group . . . anything is possible in achieving my dream of being a part of Donate Life Run/Walk 5k, Revlon Run/Walk 5K, Conquer the Bridge 5 Miles and the Long Beach Half Marathon."



Photograph of the Bixby Knolls Strollers provided by the Bixby Knolls Business Association.

Today, Hill has incorporated exercise and nutritional foods into her lifestyle and gives credit to the Strollers. She plans to participate in each of the races listed above in the coming year.

North Long Beach Walking Club

Another group in the vicinity is the North Long Beach Walking Club, which meets on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 8 a.m. at Houghton Park for 30 to 45 minutes of walking. Luz Parra, the coordinator for the Long Beach Health and Human Services Department's Latino Diabetes program, helps maintain the fitness outlet for residents.

The walking club is in its third year. Between 20 and 40 participants typically make three or four loops around paths in the park. Several walking clubs were initially started by the Long Beach Diabetes Collaborative using grant funding, but the one that has remained is now based at Houghton Park and is open to everyone. "This year it's super strong," Parra said, noting how the walkers have taken charge of their group. "Now they are meeting on their own."

Laurie Gruschka, coordinator of the Miller Family Health Education Center in Long Beach, works with Parra through the diabetes collaborative. He said the walking group is a good support network. "Luz is always linking people to services as well," she said. "Somebody who might have not gotten out of the house is now connecting with somebody who has the resources. Luz will say, 'Hey, I know about this other class,' or 'Here's a self esteem workshop.'"

2nd Street Walkers

Another community walking organization is the 2nd Street Walkers – the brainchild of Belmont Shore activist Justin Rudd and his nonprofit Community Action Team, in conjunction with Belmont Athletic Club. The group was started in 2008 as a means to facilitate fitness during the Long Beach Losers 12-week weight loss contest held each fall.

The weekly one-hour walk during the fall months starts at the Belmont Athletic Club. All ages are welcome to participate, and

the walk typically spans three to four miles. There is no cost associated with the walking club, however each participant must sign a liability waiver form.

Rudd, who is a group fitness instructor and personal trainer, said he started the walking club to get people moving. "I wanted people of all abilities to be able to get active, not just those who were taking my beach boot camp classes and training with me for triathlons," he said.

Todd Davis and his wife, who live in the Aqua Towers downtown, are walkers. Although he said he enjoys the downtown area, Belmont Shore is where he and his wife do most of their dining and shopping after walking south along the beach path.

Davis said he enjoys the fact that the walking group helps participants get to know people in the community – not just those in the club but also neighbors in their yards and store owners out and about. That, and the accountability factor of the club, is motivation enough to keep him walking. "They're expecting to see you. They want to see you. You want to see them," he said. "You want to participate too, just to give them encouragement, but it's a two-way street. But the accountability – knowing they're there waiting for you – [means] we're less likely to give it up that day."

A recent Harvard study shows that moderate walking 30 minutes a day or three hours a week can reduce your risk of heart disease. Walking has also shown to combat depression, promote weight loss, improve blood circulation, boost the immune system and regulate breathing patterns.

For more information about being involved with one of the local walking groups, contact:

- North Long Beach Walking Club – Luz Parra at 562/570-7910 or meet at Houghton Park on Tuesdays or Thursdays.
- Bixby Knolls Strollers – Blair Cohn at 562/595-0081 or meet at It's A Grind on Saturdays.
- 2nd Street Walkers – Justin Rudd at Justin@justinrudd.com. The 2nd Street Walkers meet from August through November. ■