Recreation staff offers hand to inactive teens

During her 25-year career as a physical education teacher, personal trainer and now as manager of the Tumbleweed Recreation Center's (TRC) fitness programs, Chandler Recreation Coordinator Linda Ayres has noticed a change in the physical condition of today's teenagers. While most of them are active and healthy, a growing number are neglecting their bodies through poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle.

"Online activities like video games and Facebook have pulled young people away from outdoor, more physical activities," Ayres says. "And many kids have jobs or extracurricular activities that keep them busy after school and interfere with establishing a regular exercise routine."

The challenge for Ayres and other fitness professionals is to inspire today's youths to get up off the couch and get active every day.

"In today's world, teens seem to get bored or distracted more easily," Ayres says. "To make exercise and physical fitness more appealing and attractive to young people, we need to get creative and meet their needs."

While young people may not think about their long-term health prospects as much as older adults, they do enjoy socializing and doing fun activities with their peers. Ayres sees this need to socialize as an opportunity to sell them on the benefits of interactive sports and group exercise.

One way to get teens away from their television and computer screens is to replace some of their online social life with more face-to-face interactions that come from participating in group sports. There are other benefits to working out with a friend or in a group setting.

"Team sports or social fitness activities also teach them how to get along with others and help build confidence and self-esteem in ways that texting or Facebook can't match," Ayres adds.

In June, 167 teenagers took the TRC's fitness orientation class that is required before they can work out on the fitness floor. Ayres sees that level of interest in exercise as a positive sign that teens are getting the message that the foundation for a healthy lifestyle starts when they are young.

Linda Ayres

While some teenage clients are shy about asking the TRC staff for information on nutrition and help with setting exercise goals, Ayres and her staff are stepping up their efforts to reach out to younger members and offer advice to help get them on the right path.

Ayres thinks Mayor Jay Tibshraeny's Health Connect initiative will go a long way toward helping the community realize the number of recreational opportunities offered by the City of Chandler.

"Here at the TRC, we are offering 48 different fitness and recreation classes, and they are open to teens and adults. There are also classes at the Snedigar Recreation Center, the downtown Community Center and several other locations around town."

The City also has dozens of parks, miles of walking and biking trails, sports courts, playgrounds and many other free recreational amenities.

The classes are listed in the quarterly "Break Time" recreation guide, along with information on all of the City's parks, pools and amenities. Copies of "Break Time" are available at Chandler libraries, recreation centers and other City facilities or online at www.chandleraz.gov/registration. Registration for fall classes is currently underway and most start in early September.

For more information, call 480-782-2900 or visit www.chandleraz.gov/tumbleweed.