

Podcast Episode 73

Ovidia's story:

Learning about health disparities motivated Ovidia to make changes.

Mt. Vernon, N.Y. resident Olivia found new motivation to take care of her own health by learning about health disparities in her community. “We know that many of us are overweight and have too much fat in our bodies,” she says. “It was interesting to learn about the reasons why Blacks and Hispanics have increasing rates of knee replacement. Now I have a better knowledge of why I’m having knee pain.” Ovidia participated in the Operation Change program at Grace Baptist Church, Mt. Vernon, N.Y. With host Dr. Rose Gonzalez.

All views and opinions are participants own.

Dr. Gonzalez: Hello, Welcome to this edition of the Health Disparities Podcast. I'm Dr. Rose Gonzalez, your host, and a nurse member of the Executive Steering Committee of the Movement is Life Caucus. Movement is Life is a multidisciplinary coalition seeking to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in muscle and joint health by promoting physical mobility to improve the quality of life. Today, I'm happy to be joined by Ovidia McConnell, who is a participant of our Operation Change Program at Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, New York. Hi Ovidia, how are you?

Ovidia: I am well, Rose. How are you?

Dr. Gonzalez: I'm good on this sunny day. So, it's so good to visit with you today.

It would be great if you tell our listeners a little bit about you and your background, and then how you came to Operation Change.

Ovidia: I'm a member of Grace Baptist Church. I've been a member for over 20 years and when they announced this program, I was very excited about it. I'm a mom of three boys, two adult children, and a 14-year old, in my late fifties, and always had challenges when it came to be motivated to exercise and eat healthy. So, when this program was announced, I was very excited because I know I needed to make a change.

Dr. Gonzalez: Well, let me tell you a little bit about Operation Change. So, Operation Change is a community-based behavioral change program, and it's been targeted at women who are African American, Hispanic/Latina, or who live in rural communities and experiencing joint pain due to limited mobility. The Operation Change program includes structured physical activity and is focused on awareness and education to motivate, sustained behavior change. So, that's the program. So, when you first heard about it, you know, what was the impetus for you?

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Ovidia: I've always tried to stay as healthy as possible with exercise trying to diet, but I was never motivated enough to stick with it. So, I was hoping that this program would give me the opportunity to make a lifestyle change versus something temporarily because I knew I needed that. I was having some joint pain, I was overweight and hypertension, and I knew I needed to make a change for my own personal growth and health.

Dr. Gonzalez: You were already experiencing some health challenges.

Ovidia: Absolutely.

Dr. Gonzalez: And you wanted to kind of go somewhere to maybe get on a different path. So, as you did that, you came into the program. Did you come in with friends or did you just come by yourself?

Ovidia: No. I came by myself. I did. You know, we're all friends at Grace but close friends no. I just came in by myself.

Dr. Gonzalez: Okay. So, then they gave you a folder and you got to your group. How did you feel about that group that they put you in?

Ovidia: Oh, I was very comfortable. Some of the ladies I already knew from service and some I met for the first time, which was very refreshing. So, I was very comfortable there and we were just a wonderful group of women.

Dr. Gonzalez: When we first talked to everyone about the program, we said, you know, this is an 18-week program. When you heard that, what were your thoughts about that?

Ovidia: A little worried that I wouldn't be able to do it, but I was motivated to follow through. I had to miss only, maybe about two Saturdays because of commitments I couldn't change and really very sad when it ended.

Dr. Gonzalez: We've heard that before. What was it that saddened you when it ended?

Ovidia: Just the camaraderie of the ladies, the different panels, and the different speakers that were present, were wonderful and very informative. And it motivated me even more just to make sure that I keep moving for my health and to learn about the different disparities in healthcare and health and wellness that African Americans and Latinos are not exposed to versus other communities. It was very interesting and very informative.

Dr. Gonzalez: Was there any speaker that really resonated with you or really stood out that gave you a lesson that really stuck with you?

Ovidia: There were so many, one, in particular, was a nutritionist. I don't remember her name, but she passed around on a sample of fat, which I thought was amazing that you know, you have a visual of what that is. I mean, you know, we all know that some of us are overweight and we have too much fat in our bodies, but to actually give a visual of that was extraordinary. It makes you motivated even more. And also, the orthopedist about knee replacements and how the knee replacement, how in the Black and Latino community is so much of an increase in knee replacements versus in other communities and the reasoning behind all of that, and about being overweight and how it affects our joints and muscles and things of that nature. So, those two speakers really stood out for me.

Dr. Gonzalez: That issue of obesity and weight, and actually having those visuals and yet, and someone explaining for every 10 pounds is 30 to 60 pounds of pressure on your knees. So, think about that and that even increases as you go up and down the stairs, right? So, having that visual, getting that knowledge from a provider that typically you don't see, you know, unless you're in, you know, like a patient encounter with them, right. And now they're coming and saying, "Hey, this is what happens to your knee. This is what's going on." Oh wow, that's why that hurts, right?

Ovidia: Absolutely. And me experiencing knee pain, now I have better knowledge as to why I'm having knee pain.

Dr. Gonzalez: Right. So, did getting that knowledge also help you try to decide maybe what your goals might be doing the program?

Ovidia: Oh, absolutely. Well, even just the name of the program of Movement is Life. I am a systems analyst, so I sit at my desk all day and because I sit at my desk all day, I don't move as often as I should. And so, some of the speakers, you know, it relates onto, oh, well now I know why my hips are hurting. Now, I know why my knees are hurting. Now, I know what I need to do in order to alleviate those pains and get healthier. So, this program helped a great deal. Especially, with my stationary lifestyle because of work and I spend a lot of hours at my desk working, so I know that I need to get up and I know I need to move. And I know I need to incorporate some types of movement for my own wellbeing.

Dr. Gonzalez: Did you pick up any new behaviors or change any behaviors while you were in the program that maybe you continue to do on a regular basis or engage in on a regular basis?

Ovidia: I have improved my diet. So, just the effects of sugar in the diet, and I have a sweet tooth, unfortunately. So, I try to alleviate or try to reduce the amount of sugar intake in my body and salt and because I am hypertensive, I also know that from learning, I must decrease that. And

also different things that I can do while I'm sitting at my desk. That was a big deal. Like chair yoga was one of the classes we had, which was extraordinary. There are different exercises I can do while I'm sitting at my desk. I cannot always get up and maybe move around as often as I'd like, because if I'm in a meeting or if I'm involved in a project that I need to complete, in Operation Change, I've learned that I can do things at my desk while I'm working, take the minute or two and move around. And that's better than doing nothing.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, that is helpful because we do get stuck. I hear what you're saying. You were doing a project or you're writing something, you're analyzing something, you can't really be walking around. So, you're by the computer and you're trying to focus, right to get that work done. You don't want to lose that focus and that energy, but you also know, movement is helpful and is important to life. So, working in those little key changes can make a difference and even just the increased awareness, right. Just knowing, oh maybe I should move. I mean, there are tricks that you can, you know you start to say, "Oh, I've been sitting in here for an hour. I need to get up." Right?

Ovidia: Absolutely.

Dr. Gonzalez: Then when it comes to diet like I hear what you're saying about the sugar and the salt. So much of that is hidden in the food that we eat.

Ovidia: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: That we are not even aware of. So, we think we're on a good path, right, but then we turn around and look and we say, "Oh, what? When did that happen?" You know. So, being more aware and getting those individuals to speak to us about that. That's really helpful. So, sounds like you, learned in movement, that chair yoga was helpful. What other kinds of movements did you engage in at Operation Change?

Ovidia: Well there was someone who came in and did a yoga class and that was really the first time I've really tried yoga and really enjoyed it. So, what I've done going forward is just to look for different yoga classes on YouTube and things of that nature.

Dr. Gonzalez: Oh nice.

Ovidia: Just to continue that I had a friend of mine asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I told her I want a yoga mat and she was nice enough to give me a yoga mat. So, just those little things really encouraged me just to keep up what I've been doing.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, there was always an educational session. There was also then the movement, which it sounds like you've integrated into your everyday. The third one was the group social support.

Ovidia: That was wonderful because we were able to share our own personal experiences and challenges when it came to eating properly or weight loss or any of those items. It was nice to share with the ladies to see what their challenges were and to even share that, oh, well, that's my challenge, too. What can we do to do better? We exchanged different information about classes. One of our members did a lot of swimming and she gave us information about that. So, it was very helpful because we all wanted to help each other to kind of accomplish the same goal, you know. So, it was very good.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you kind of became like a little small group of support for each other.

Ovidia: Absolutely.

Dr. Gonzalez: If you were to say, what was your big takeaway from Movement is Life's Operation Change Program. What would you say was your big take away from it?

Ovidia: Well, a number of things. It's not just moving. It's about moving and incorporating it into a lifestyle when it comes to your diet and your movement and your wellbeing and your mental wellbeing. So, all of that has to come into play before you can accomplish anything. And another thing I've taken away is that we have to set time out for ourselves to do this for ourselves. So, we can't do it for family members. We have to do it for us because we love ourselves that much, that we want to incorporate a healthier lifestyle.

And also, about the different disparities as an African American woman, I'm kind of predisposed to not adequate healthcare, to all these different ailments that are hereditary, unfortunately. I have hypertension because my mother had it, because my grandmother had it. So, I really need to be more proactive in a good healthy lifestyle because of what I'm predisposed to, unfortunately. You know, most African Americans, we're predisposed to hypertension and diabetes, and we need to know what we can do on our part to be proactive in order to live a longer life and be healthier.

Dr. Gonzalez: Was it hard to really move in the direction that you had to take care of yourself? So many women find themselves, I'm Latina and I'm a nurse. Caretaking for me is normal, but it's not about caretaking for myself, it's about others. So, was that a hard change for you to say, "Hey, I need to

take care of myself." First of all, to realize it, right, and then to take it within yourself and really allow it to grow and allow yourself to take care of. Was that hard? Was that challenging?

Ovidia: Yes and it still is. I challenge myself daily with that. Even to do a little movement that I do now whether it be walking at lunchtime or doing a yoga class online. I have a 14-year-old and a husband and a dog that require my attention. So, it's hard to say, well, let me do this first and then I'll take care of you guys. You know, but I've had to force myself to do that and my husband's very supportive of that. And it's also hard to stay motivated. You know, I work about 10, 11 hours a day. At the end of the day, I'm tired. All I want to do is kind of sit with the remote control and do nothing. But I know from Operation Change that that's not going to benefit me. Even if it's a little bit, even if it's 15 minutes, I need to move a little bit so that I can be healthier. And so, I've tried to incorporate that as much as I possibly can.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, you have adopted healthier behaviors.

Ovidia: Yeah.

Dr. Gonzalez: You're trying to eat better. Right? You're trying to look at your nutrition, right? Now have any of that, you know, you said you had a 14-

year-old and your husband and a dog, and I know what it's like with the dog. You want to take care of them too. They require attention.

Ovidia: Yes.

Dr. Gonzalez: They're like babies. So, have any of them, the guys adopted any changes based on the change that they've seen with you?

Ovidia: Yes. Well, my 14-year-old is into basketball. So, this summer he's been doing a lot of basketball. But I have noticed more of an effort. I've been trying to talk him into eating better and not so much processed stuff, you know because it's not good for you. So, I'm verbalizing this information to him. And with my husband, he's pretty healthy but he likes his muffins and his potato chips and things of that nature. So, what I've learned from Operation Change about these items, I always try to let him know what those things do to your body and that it's not good and try to substitute something else for it because of the effects of it. So, it's helped. Whether they're listening, I'm not sure, I think so. I hope so, but at least they know. So, at least I have the knowledge to be able to share with them.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, the knowledge is important in that program.

Ovidia: Absolutely.

Dr. Gonzalez: It's kind of like a building block, the knowledge, the movement, and then the support. When you were in those support groups, did you find that the other women were sharing the same stories? Like, "Oh, I didn't know about that. I didn't know that there was that kind of bias. I didn't know that we had a predisposition to this." Was there a common 'aha' moment for all of them?

Ovidia: Well, yeah, absolutely. I mean, there were things about the disparities in different areas. I wasn't aware of that and I don't think my team members were either. So, we did converse about that and have discussions about that and how surprised we were and saddened too by it, by the bias. But, you know, we realized that it starts with us to make that change. So, we were motivated to do that.

Dr. Gonzalez: So, do you think the program that also helped you to be more of an advocate for yourself when you went into your visits with your providers with either your physician or nurse practitioner, that when you went to the visit, you weren't just taking the word, you know, as gospel truth. But you were saying you felt more comfortable advocating for yourself at that visit saying, "Well, I'm not sure. Will you explain this to me?" Did you find that your visits maybe to your providers changed because of the program in any way?

Ovidia: Oh, absolutely. So, not afraid to ask questions to my doctor. If I have a question, I will ask, what's the effects of the medication? Is there a better way? You know, also just to advocate for myself and not have a fear that, well, he does know best. He knows all. But I am an active part of my own healthcare, not just what he tells me, but to have a dialogue with him. So, that was a great takeaway too, from Operation Change that it's okay to question your doctor or ask what are the side effects of this medication and is there something else you can prescribe that won't give me those side effects or anything that you have a question about. If the doctor wants to perform surgery or is there an alternative, you know, or to get a second opinion. I mean, we all have that right to do that and we shouldn't be afraid to do that. Operation Change made us aware that we don't have to be afraid to ask questions or even to get a second opinion that we have every right to be an active participant in our healthcare.

Dr. Gonzalez: The Operation Change Program, it seems like it impacted you in several ways. Right? More education on health. So, it increased your health literacy, certainly because it gave you some more information on what happens with your knees, with knee pain. How diet impacts you? How movement impacts your daily life? How can it impact your family's life by changing small things, right? You learn how to do chair yoga that you continue and it empowered you for your medical visits or healthcare visits,

right? So, you're a little more of an advocate for yourself instead of a bystander in that visit saying, "Okay, well, I'll just take this," you know. And then, it sounds like with that whole group that and those discussions that it helped you to understand that you need to come first too, and you need to take time for yourself. And it sounds like Operation Change has changed that perception that you now do make time for yourself, even though you are really busy. So, if you had some final words to say about Operation Change to others who might be exposed to it.

Ovidia: Well, I find that Operation Change is not just about movement or exercise, it's such a balanced program. It teaches you the nutrition aspect. It teaches you the mental health aspect. It teaches you, of course, the movement aspect. It's like an all in one program for overall health and to be able to incorporate that as a lifestyle, not just something for 18 weeks. So, it gives you the tools that you would need to incorporate in your life, and also to make you aware of the disparities in African American and Hispanic communities so that you can be an advocate for yourself. So, it's just a well-rounded program and it doesn't address one area of health, but your overall health. And if someone could go away with that, that would be wonderful and just stick with it. Be committed to it because you won't be sorry. It's just something that you could take away and incorporate in your lifestyle and incorporate it in your family's lifestyle, as well, and make them healthier as well in the process.

Dr. Gonzalez: Nice. Well, Ovidia, I want to thank you for sharing your journey with us today. I know you're really busy and time is so valuable, but I think it's clear to me that this program has impacted your life for the better, right.

Ovidia: Absolutely.

Dr. Gonzalez: And we hope that you know, Operation Change can resume at Grace Church, again, once the pandemic is under control and we feel safer. I want to thank our listeners for joining us for this edition of the Health Disparities podcast. And we hope you find this edition enlightening and inspiring. I want to thank you again, Ovidia. I want to thank Grace Baptist Church for all the work they do for the women in the community and for Operation Change. From all of us at Movement is Life and the Health Disparities Podcast, please stay safe, stay well, join us again soon. Bye-Bye.

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