

Diabetes Health

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She Helps Her People Avoid Diabetes

Helen Oliff, for National Relief Charities

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Lynn Cuny

"I wasn't even addressing my high blood pressure until my uncle Jay, in a nursing home at 36, said 'Don't get [diabetes](#).' 'I won't,' I promised him, and it changed my life."

A 32-year-old Native American woman from South Dakota, Lynn Cuny is of Crow Creek Dakota and Oglala Lakota heritage. Also known as "She Helps Her People," Lynn is living an empowered "life choice" that, despite heredity and predisposition, helps her avoid diabetes.

This path led Lynn, a former Head Start teacher for the Pine Ridge Reservation, to become a certified personal trainer. She is also a health technician for a Special Diabetes Prevention Program in South Dakota, where she works with people who are pre[diabetic](#).

This year, Lynn teamed up with National Relief Charities (NRC) on a diabetes-related project sponsored by General Mills. NRC is a nonprofit dedicated to improving quality of life for Native Americans living on poverty-stricken reservations. Together, Lynn and NRC are developing and delivering a health-and-fitness curriculum for Head Start children and families on the Crow Creek Reservation.

The youth on Crow Creek are at high risk of diabetes and obesity. One aim of the project is to teach them the benefits of physical activity and good nutritional choices at an early age, in the hope of averting diabetes. This culturally relevant curriculum will likely be a model that can be replicated for other reservation Head Starts.

American Indian people have the highest rate of diabetes of any ethnic group in the world. Lynn is familiar with this both personally and professionally. Her uncle Jay developed diabetes when he was only eight years old. Before he died, he asked one thing of Lynn: "Don't become a diabetic." At first she laughed it off, believing that he must be joking because her fate was already sealed.

Fortunately, Lynn was mistaken. Her uncle helped her see that diabetes could be avoided if she took control and helped herself. It took an experienced loved one to help her understand that even though her maternal grandmother, maternal grandfather, paternal grandfather, and uncle developed diabetes, she didn't have to. She had a choice. Uncle Jay's teachings and his passing inspired Lynn with the clarity and motivation to ward off diabetes.

At the time, Lynn was on the fast food track. As a struggling college student in Albuquerque, she held three jobs to cover tuition, so it seemed fortunate that her boyfriend worked at McDonald's and could get free cheeseburgers. A diet full of starch and devoid of vegetables fit well with her schedule and budget, but her health was spinning out of control. By her early twenties, Lynn had been hospitalized three times for blackouts from high blood pressure. She had numbness in her hands and feet, at times so severe that she couldn't get up. The Indian Health Service diagnosed her as prediabetic.

After her promise to her uncle, Lynn got busy taking off the weight. A Diabetes Prevention Program study shows that people with prediabetes can reduce their risk of diabetes by 58 percent if they lose just five to seven percent of their body weight. Exercising is most important: It supports [weight loss](#) and helps muscle cells use glucose. Starting at around 300 pounds, Lynn walked a lap, then a few, then ran a lap for her uncle, then spent 10 minutes on a treadmill or bike, and eventually began a mix of [exercise](#) and workout routines. "I wanted to feel stronger and healthier. It got easier once I got out there," she says. She knew that she was turning a corner when it felt okay for people to see her 50, 60, and then 70 pounds lighter.


Changing eating habits was harder. From an early age, Lynn craved carbs, soda, and coffee with lots of sugar. In college, she added supersized burgers. She went through a steep learning curve on the kinds of foods that would keep her healthy and give her the fuel to maintain her exercise and lifestyle. "All the things I craved were not healthy, and all the things I never ate as a child were the foods I needed to eat," she says.

After a year of abstinence from cheeseburgers - her former "go to" food - Lynn told herself that she could eat just one. To her surprise, it made her feel tired and sick. Giving up coffee took a while too; she felt withdrawal giving it up. But she persisted, and today she enjoys chicken, fish, buffalo, plain salads and fresh raw vegetables, beans for protein and fiber, wheat or multigrain bagels or toast, oatmeal, and flax. She is healthy and "she helps her people." Coffee and cheeseburgers are a distant memory.

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