Spring 2019 Partner Spotlight: YMCA

Everyone knows the song and everyone knows the dance…but what more do you know about the YMCA? The Valley of the Sun YMCA was established in 1892 and currently serves over 100,000 families state-wide. With numerous programs for all ages, the YMCA has something to offer everyone. The Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (CHPDP) currently partners with the YMCA of downtown Phoenix through our “Every Little Step Counts” research grant, led by Dr. Gabe Shaibi. We spoke with Libby Corral, Valley of the Sun YMCA Sr. Vice President of Operations and Programs, and Katie Smetana, Vice President of Operations, about our partnership and the unique and important role the YMCA plays in our community.

Please tell me about your positions at the Downtown YMCA and describe the organization’s role in the community.

Libby: My role as the Sr. Vice President of Programs and Operations is to oversee branch operations and the different programs we have to offer the community, including our partnerships with external organizations like ASU. Our programs include group sport programs, exercise and gym classes, and multiple educational programs for all ages. An important focus for the YMCA is working toward a “better us” and by us we mean everyone.

Katie: As the Vice President of Operations at the Downtown YMCA location, I directly oversee this location. The YMCA is a dependable resource to families throughout the valley and has been for 125 years. We want the public to understand the YMCA is more than a gym and place to swim. We incorporate our core values into multiple educational programs from English as a Second language, nutrition programming and much more! It’s about a better you, a better community, a better organization, all for a better “us.”

The YMCA currently partners with Dr. Gabe Shaibi and his research team on the “Every Little Step Counts” project, aimed toward preventing type 2 diabetes in Latino youth. This population is at a higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes and our work together to educate the families while providing hands-on nutrition and physical activity instruction, benefits everyone in multiple ways. Can you describe the YMCA’s role and some of the benefits you see from this partnership?

Libby: As a community partner in the “Every Little Step Counts” research project, our role is to engage families at a higher level, give them an opportunity to learn the physical activity and educational nutrition program curriculum, and maintain a life-long, healthy lifestyle through their continued connection with the YMCA. During the program, they visit the YMCA on a weekly basis as a cohort which gives them “family” togetherness time while learning how to engage in the programs offered here, in hopes their desire to lead a healthy lifestyle continues their journey through the YMCA. Most research participants are not current members so it opens the door to them becoming and continuing their membership. Money from research grants also help us as a non-profit by offsetting some of our costs, in turn, helping us provide more services to the community.

Katie: Through our collaboration with “Every Little Step Counts,” these particular groups are developing their identity, learning goal-setting, and practicing healthy living skills. Their participation in the research project gives them a sense of security to try something they may have not done on their own. Through this type of partnership and research, we have the opportunity to provide parents with tools to help raise healthy families. Their relationships at the YMCA begins to solidify and their comfort level develops past the project staff and participants, which helps sustain a healthier lifestyle that can continue at the YMCA after their research participation has ended. We can’t do our work alone and need to find the right partners to create mutually beneficial relationships to serve those we otherwise couldn’t reach.
Our center brought together a group of transdisciplinary faculty in collaboration to promote health and prevent disease in underserved populations. We work closely with the community to identify and address their needs. The YMCA is known for its inclusivity and outreach for people of all ages. Can you describe the YMCA culture in this aspect and how our research partnership helps create connections to community members?

Libby: Promoting healthy lifestyle programs from “cradle to grave” provides opportunities to all, including those underserved populations. We offer financial assistance to those who cannot afford programs so they are able to participate. Looking across the spectrum of life, one could start at 3-months-old in swim lessons or child-watch and continue all the way up into their later years doing chair aerobics while bonding with others and that may be their only social activity each day. I think that as your team does the research focused on youth and prevention, when they complete their part in the study, we are the consistent part they can continue...they will never outgrow the YMCA and what it has to offer.

Katie: Originally, this group of youth and families come to the YMCA for the research project but we hope they stay because of the bonds they create and core value education they have received. Our charge is making sure that the YMCA can be accessible to everyone regardless of their means. The core of our responsibility to the community is to focus on inclusivity and making sure vulnerable populations are included in the programs here. We recently released a video called “Zip Codes” about how the YMCA aims to break the barriers of access to our programs and facilities regardless of someone’s location. It is a top priority of our organization and extremely important to our employees.

What makes you most passionate about your work at the YMCA?
Libby: I have worked with the YMCA for over 20 years and seeing not only the members engaged, but also our volunteers and staff connecting to community in a very deep and invested way and seeing change in others, whether it’s a kid participating in ELSC who then continues to live a healthier lifestyle or a parent who understands and learns how to change a behavior through life changes. Also the fact that the YMCA cannot be outgrown, you just grow into something new. We are actually changing lives and making communities better.

Katie: Similarly to what Libby said, the reach that the YMCA has as the largest non-profit social services organization in the country is astounding. To be connected to that and impact families on a multi-generational level is very unique! One day you could be teaching a child the confidence and skills to swim and later that same day you work with a 98-year-old senior visiting the YMCA to exercise and socialize. Where else can you get that range of ages and activities in one location? The power of us as a movement with over 70,000 members locally and the impact we can make to change our communities for good is unlike most other organizations.

What is your vision of the YMCA’s continued work with ASU research?
Libby: The size of ASU and variety of work we both do allows for endless partnership opportunities. I look forward to seeing other possible research partnerships on a multitude of levels.

Katie: We as an organization are the foundation of limitless healthy living components but there’s a whole other world we haven’t even scratched the surface of and this is where I see innovative partners like ASU helping us continue to expand upon our work with the community and what we have to offer.