And somewhere over the past 30 years, a lot of us here gained much too much weight.

Basically, we ate too much and moved too little. Our children watched too much TV, played too many video games, and ate too many french fries and not enough greens. To give you an idea of where things stand: Tennessee is the third fattest state in the country, and Dyer County is one of the least healthy, most overweight counties in the state. More than a third of adults in the county are obese, and almost half of the kids are obese or overweight.

No one was ready for it. I’m the head of the Dyer County YMCA, and I’m in charge of the project. We’re not a large operation, and I have a lot on my plate. I have a total of three full-time employees at the Y, and I’m 42, and when I was growing up near Atlanta, we’d go outside on a Saturday morning, we’d spend the day running around, and we wouldn’t come home until dusk. Society is different now, and a lot of parents don’t allow their kids to do that anymore. So we have to do more to make sure kids get the activity they need.

I love football and baseball, but we want to reach the kids who aren’t playing team sports too. You can lose weight with all kinds of activities. For instance, one of our elementary schools began an aerobics class once a week during school. A teacher at a city intermediate school started the “Morning Mile Club,” where students walk around the track before classes. The kids started tracking how many miles they walked, which got them excited about what they were doing. Now, on sunny days you can see 100 kids out there walking. One student walked 26 miles in just a few weeks. Teachers tell me that they can tell which days the kids are walking because their behavior is better during class.

We also started a contest with all of our 3rd, 4th and 5th graders. Students keep track of how much exercise they get after school; the class that moves the most wins prizes. The kids tell their parents ‘I have to go outside and play.’ Everybody in the family starts to realize that daily exercise is really important.

Our cafeterias are also changing. We now give students only fresh fruit snacks — no more cupcakes and candy in our city primary school.

And of course the Y can help too. My favorite example one of our teens who got a membership, started working out and taking classes, and lost close to 100 pounds. It was great to see how his confidence grew. He’d always been withdrawn, but as he lost weight, he really began coming out of his shell.

We’re a rural area, and we have a lot of open space, which has some beautiful walking and hiking trails running through it. But right now, not enough people use these trails. We’re trying to connect these trails to the places that people live so they can just walk out their door and start moving. Dyersburg is 20 miles from the Mississippi River, and we’ve been talking about creating a blueway there, a designated water trail for canoeists and kayakers. Paddling definitely counts as exercise.

We know we have a lot more to do. We didn’t become fat overnight. It might take 15 or 20 years to fix this problem. Maybe if we keep at it, we’ll end up like Salt Lake City, with our downtown streets painted with bike lanes, and packs of bikers pedaling to work every day. I’m sure that’s something I could get used to.