

VEGGIE POWER TO THE RESCUE

It's no new news that American youth are reaching concerning levels of inactivity and malnutrition. Spearheading the issue locally is **Nancy Erlick**, creator of "Once Upon a Farm," an interactive program at The Children's Museum of the Treasure Coast that uses fruit- and vegetable-themed characters to inspire health.

BY IKE CRUMPLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDSEY POTTER

Day shift: Stare at computer screen. Evening shift: Park it in front of the big-screen TV. Exercise: Thumbs, sliding tiny images across the ever-present mobile screen. Nourishment: Sodas and snacks high in fat, salt and sugar.

It sounds, depressingly, like much of modern-day adulthood. But these days, it's childhood, too. And the problem, which Nancy Erlick spotted long ago, is worsening.

"It was really 20 years ago that I started noticing that kids were increasingly eating junk food," the Stuart resident recalls. "They would come out of school eating chips. They weren't exercising. I thought to myself, I have to inspire kids to love eating healthy and exercising."

A grandmother who practices yoga and Pilates, the lifetime health-and-fitness aficionado has invested her efforts into reversing this dangerous trend, employing her imagination along the way. Drawing on her experience working in children's television, she created "Once Upon a Farm" in 1995.

A line complete with comic and coloring books, T-shirts, tote bags and placemats captures the adventures of Spiffy and friends—more than 20 characters created from fruits and vegetables. Erlick even wrote a TV show, "Keep up

with Kids," and the children's musical, "Go Climb A Vine." Although both remain unproduced and in search of investors, her vision of celebrated nutrition is on display at the Children's Museum of the Treasure Coast in Jensen Beach.

Spiffy's playground is enough to give Ronald McDonald, Hamburglar and the Fry Guys high blood pressure (as though they don't already have it). Made possible through donors David L. Smythe and Martin Health System, the play structure amuses—and challenges—ages 2 to 12 with the Carrot Climb, Squash Slide and Spiffy's Balance Board.

"Many of the older kids, they can't even balance because they've never exercised," Erlick laments.

Erlick was 5 years old when her family moved from Boston to Miami in search of some relief for her father's serious sinus condition.

"He preached health because his suffered," Erlick remembers. "He said, 'Even with all the money in the world, you can't buy health.'"

The lesson stuck with Erlick, as did his example. Although the warmer climate provided little respite for her father, his garden's vegetables rounded out the nightly salads. The entire family loved exercise.

Today, technology—and our dependence on it—twists traditional definitions of human interaction and activity. The results prove disquieting. A report published last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that within the last 30 years, obesity rates in children ages 6 to 11 have doubled, and obesity rates in adolescent ages 12 to 19 have quadrupled.

Change, Erlick understands, will command a paradigm shift. The proven appeal of her characters and creations could inspire children to form a new foundation of healthy habits, but her reach is limited. She's in search of corporate sponsors or philanthropists to help get "Once Upon A Farm" materials and playgrounds at children's museums, children's hospitals and elementary school playgrounds across the country.

"What's going on is just frightening—the inactivity among kids is an epidemic now," she says. "We have to find some people who are concerned enough about the future of our children to want to do something about it now." ■

