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Walkers, start your pedometers! Vilma Hernandez, foreground, and the Lunch Walkers. From left, Maria Puentes, Liliana Solorio-Vela, Dalila Valles, Kirsten Bell, Milagritos Acosta, Gail Harvey, Fanny Ortiz, Tatiana Martinez, Lou Bendijo-Wong, Debbie Coddington, Carmen Barocio, Marie Tervalon, Milca Elorriaga, and Alicia Carnero. Not pictured: Nellie Quevedo, Bertha Bruner, and Casaundra Mangan. Men are allowed, though none have applied. Yet.



This club was made for walking

- The Metro Lunch Walkers are taking positive steps to improve their health and their waistline by conducting urban treks within walking distance of Metro Headquarters.



By GAYLE ANDERSON

(March 13, 2008) Vilma Hernandez is leading a revolution.

The diminutive, sweet-tempered customer relations representative, whose cool, calm demeanor assures sometimes frantic customers that you can *indeed* get there from here on Metro, has parlayed lunch time walking into a bonafide employee club that is whittling inches from waistlines, infusing the workplace with bursts of energy and has the capacity to change mood rings from a somber gray and high-anxiety amber to cool-as-a-cucumber blue.

Hernandez, and fellow customer relations agents Milca Elorriaga and Dalila Valles, franchised their lunch hour walks into an official Metro Employee Club in January. The club status enabled the fitness proponents to purchase pedometers, which the members use to calculate their miles, steps and calories burned.

Vilma Hernandez, foreground, keeps track of her fitness on the pedometer. Nellie Quevedo, background, walks on her 30-minute lunch break.

Open to everyone who wants to participate, new members are issued a pedometer and an exercise log to keep track of progress. The only requirement for membership is a willingness to incorporate walking into the lunch hour and a commitment to do so at least three times a week.

The walking regime is not limited to a certain time or group. Just grab a buddy and go at a time when it's convenient for you, says Hernandez.

"Walking with friends and co-workers during lunch to manage and regain our health — one step at a time — is the main objective of this program," said Hernandez. "Our goal is to exercise at least three times during the week and motivate each other to remain committed.

"Walking reduces cholesterol, lowers blood pressure, helps you lose weight, recharges your energy, reduces stress and it's just plain fun!" says Hernandez, who can tick off benefits faster than you can say "cheeseburger" at a fast food drive-up window.

Time was when Nellie Quevedo, OD&T Training Coordinator, enjoyed a nice sit-down lunch in the cafeteria at noontime. But that was way before she hooked up with Vilma Hernandez and the Lunch Walkers. Now, come lunchtime, she laces up her running shoes, grabs a bottle of water, sets her pedometer and takes off from the Gateway Plaza area for a 30-minute two-footed spin around Union Station with a dedicated team of walkers.

Another member, Customer Service Agent Fanny Ortiz, has been walking to work since November, a 2.5 mile distance that she sometimes treks with her children on the weekends. She's switched to preparing lower-calorie, higher nutrition meals at home for the benefit of her family. And, she's swapped early afternoon sugar lows for a burst of very productive energy.

Joining the Lunch Walkers kicked her already impressive program up a notch. "I've lost a whole pant size," says Fanny, and, if you can catch up with her at lunchtime, she'll tell you all about it.



From left, Dalila Valles, Kirsten Bell and Vilma Hernandez end the Union Station loop on the East Portal stairs. Valles and Bell, both vigorous exercisers, are the pace-setters for the 11:30 walk.

• Photos by Gayle Anderson

A typical Metro Lunch Walker can log in 2.5 miles in a 45-minute walkabout. That's about 6,000 steps and a 300-calorie burn. Fitness levels range from a marathoner who can ski slaloms backwards (that would be Kirsten Bell) to a self-professed former cubicle, er, couch potato (that would be an unnamed but nevertheless inspired reporter, me.)

Charter members include club organizers Hernandez, Milca Elorriaga and Dalila Valles and foot soldiers Bertha Bruner, Maria Puentes, Tatiana Martinez, Fanny Ortiz, Carmen Barocio, Milagritos Acosta, Kirsten Bell, Casaundra Mangan, Alicia Carnero, Lou Bendijo-Wong, Nellie Quevedo, Debbie Coddington, Liliana Solorio-Vela and Marie Tervalon.

For more information and to sign up, contact Vilma Hernandez, Milca Elorriaga or Dalila Valles.

And, put your running shoes on. The group plans to register for the 5k Revlon Run/Walk for Breast Cancer on May 10. You can go, too.