



COLIN HACKLEY

CHASING OBESITY OUT OF IMMOKALEE

No sooner had the ink dried on Javier Rosado’s study of obesity in Immokalee than he transformed from academic observer into anti-obesity coach.

In his paper last March in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, he concluded: “Interventions are needed that address both childhood obesity and parent weight status among Latino migrant farmworkers.” He didn’t wait for someone else to provide those interventions. For Rosado, clinical training director for psychology at the College of Medicine’s Health Education Site in Immokalee, the people of this migrant-rich community are not just research subjects. They’re his neighbors.

To help them beat the obesity odds, Rosado – with the support of the University of Florida Family Nutrition Program – assembled a team that includes a physician, nurses, a registered dietitian, a Zumba instructor and a soccer coach to create Salud Immokalee, a 12-month obesity intervention program. Research among migrant farmworkers is rare, and Rosado is thrilled by this opportunity.

“That is why community-based research is so powerful,” he said. “You don’t have to wait years to put findings into action.”

Fast-forward to the end of July. It’s the last night of the most intensive phase of Salud Immokalee. While parents get reminders about diet and exercise,

16 kids review the food groups and yell out examples of foods labeled Go (“Carrots!”), Slow (“Pancakes!”) and Whoa (“Fatty, salty chips!”).

Soon half of them are out back chasing soccer balls, and half are in a heart-pounding Zumba exercise class, where the energy level is all Go and no Whoa.

At evening’s end, each child has received a certificate, pretzels, fruit and a jump rope. Each parent has received a promise that Rosado and his team will keep tabs on them and their kids through next spring, taking vital signs and inquiring about successes and challenges.

“One of our biggest challenges is transportation,” Rosado said. “Immokalee isn’t that big, but our farmworkers’ village is maybe three miles from the farmers market. That’s a problem if you’re trying to do grocery-shopping without a car, there’s one bus for the entire town, and you worked a long day.”

What pleased Rosado the most, perhaps, was that during this program the parents discovered each other.

“It’s an immigrant community,” he said. “A lot of people come on their own. They don’t have family members. They don’t know many people. They end up isolated in their homes.”

Now they have a support group. And hope.

▲ These 16 kids all received certificates congratulating them for completing the first phase of the Salud Immokalee Program.