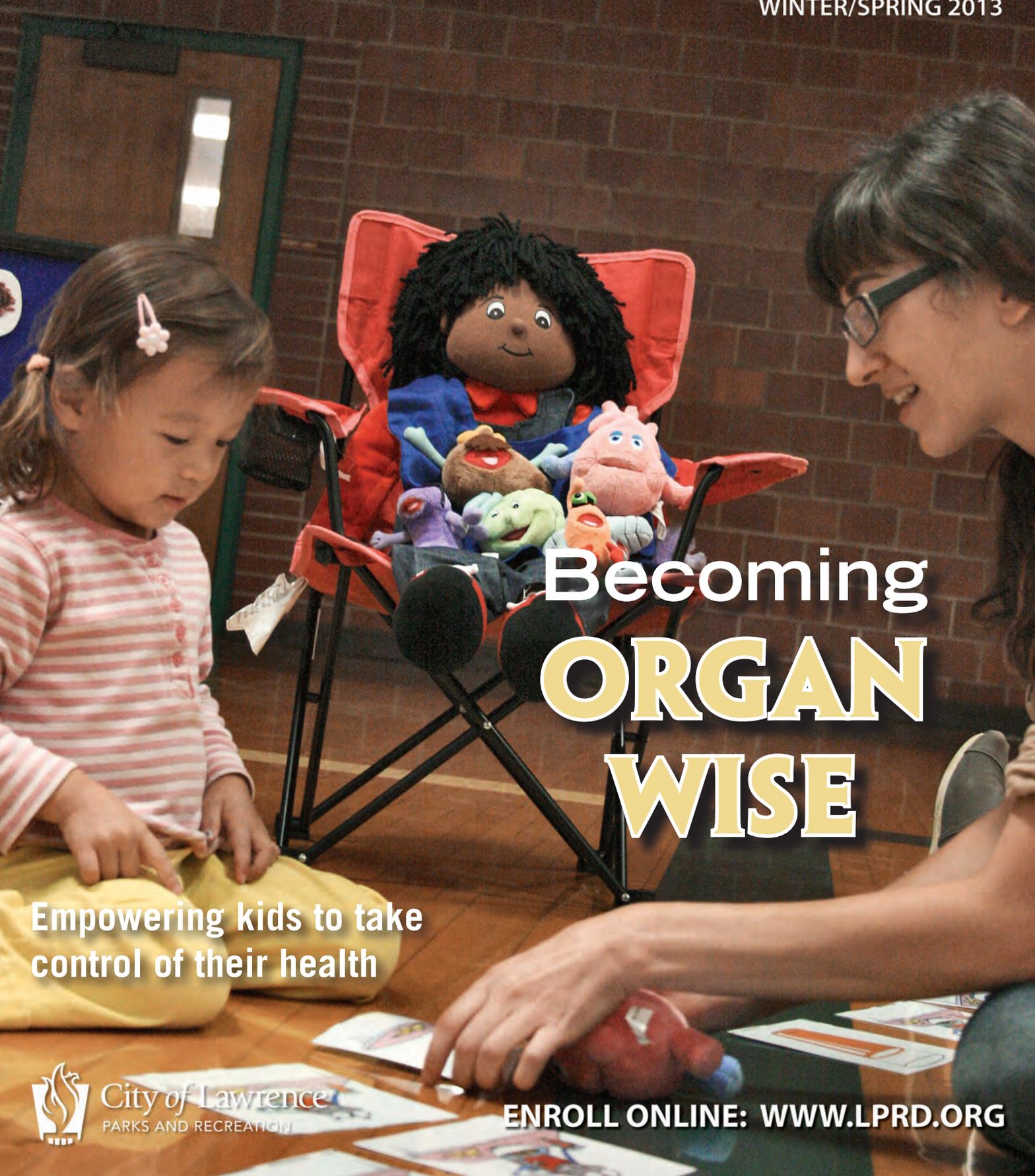


LAWRENCE PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

# ACTIVITIES GUIDE

WINTER/SPRING 2013



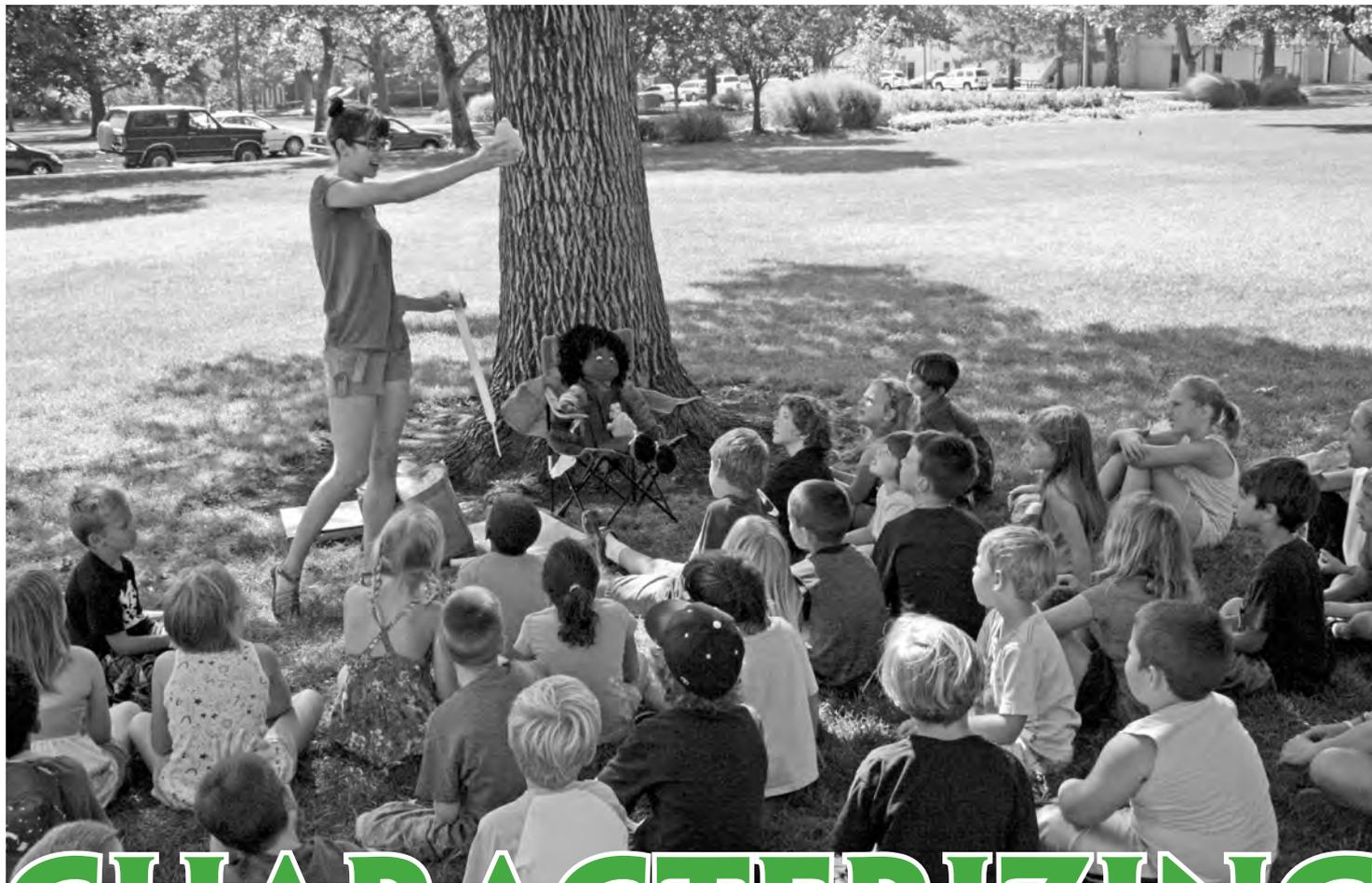
## Becoming **ORGAN** **WISE**

Empowering kids to take  
control of their health



City of Lawrence  
PARKS AND RECREATION

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# CHARACTERIZING THE COMMUNITY

*By Andrew Ruszczyk*

**T**his past summer, youth enrolled in Lawrence Parks and Recreation Department programming were introduced to a new, innovative nutrition education program. The new program was provided through a National Recreation and Park Association grant, which was funded by the Kansas Health Foundation. Lawrence was one of five Kansas communities to receive \$50,000 to assist with the summer free lunch program. The NRPA has awarded grants for the past three years to parks and recreation agencies across the country for feeding programs that have served more than 16 million meals to low-income children.

With the grant support to the free lunch program, it also allowed the department to provide a curriculum for its camps which has made measurable results in the childhood obesity epidemic.

Parks and Recreation hired Jessie Danon to develop the OrganWise program, integrating it into the summer camps to

help kids learn about health and nutrition in a fun and interactive way.

Danon wants people to understand that learning how to be healthy doesn't have to be boring.

"The most important thing about teaching nutrition is that it is fun," Danon said. "It doesn't have to be a scientific and painful experience to eat healthy."

The OrganWise Guys were established in 1993 by long-time friends Michelle Lombardo and Karen McNamara. Over the years, the program has developed a national presence, appearing in more than 20 states. The OrganWise Guys consist of a set of characters that are all uniquely named after the organ they represent, such as Hardy Heart, Madame Muscle and the Kidney Brothers, just to name a few.

Lombardo and McNamara started their advocacy efforts by educating adults about health and nutrition, but realized that if they could educate the youth, they could stop bad habits from happening while kids are young.

"We realized if these diseases can take decades to materialize, how do we teach our

kids now about living a healthy lifestyle so they don't go down that road," Lombardo said.

The OrganWise program has been shown to have a significant impact on weight, blood pressure and academic achievement among children who participate in the program, according to results published in several journals, including the American Journal of Public Health.

Lombardo wants the OrganWise Guys program to continue growing to reach more children and their parents by producing 26 television episodes with the characters. Her hope is that with the programs help, healthy living will be a standard for all children.

"Our vision is to have an OrganWise lifestyle be the norm instead of the exception, so that all kids can reach their potential and live a healthy life," Lombardo said.

The OrganWise Guys give children the opportunity to learn about each organ character and the importance that they serve for the body. Through interactive games and activities, kids learn what they need to do to take adequate care of their bodies. Danon says The OrganWise Guys give children the knowl-



“ The OrganWise Guys provide children a way to take control of their health and make their own decisions.”  
*Jessie Danon*



edge needed to make good health decisions.

“The OrganWise Guys provide children a way to take control of their health and make their own decisions,” Danon said. “This program gives them the knowledge they need at an early age and hopefully they carry this knowledge with them throughout their lives.”

According to the Center for Disease Control, approximately 17 percent of children and youth aged 2 years old to 19 years old are obese. In addition, 1 of 7 low-income, preschool-aged children are obese.

By implementing The OrganWise Guys nutrition program at the summer free lunch programs and at youth camps around the city, Lawrence Parks and Recreation hopes this proactive approach will have a ripple effect on the community. Roger Steinbrock, Parks and Recreation marketing supervisor, thinks The OrganWise Guys program can reach way beyond the youth of the community.

“Our hope is that through this program kids will go home and tell their parents that everyone needs to be eating healthy and be active,” Steinbrock said. “We have had parents call in and tell us that their child has told them they need to be healthy, and that is what this program can do.”

Steinbrock believes educating the community’s youth about how to be healthy is very important. That is why a majority of the grant was used to fund an educator and implement a program that will have a lasting effect on kids and adults alike long after the grant has expired.

“I saw a great need for education,”

Steinbrock said. “I feel that this is a community effort, and we can solve the obesity problem better together than separately.”

The OrganWise Guys program has already been used this summer with the free lunch program and camps, and Steinbrock hopes that the program can continue to be integrated into LPRD programming. He believes The OrganWise Guys can be taught in already existing programs to make children realize that they need to take care of themselves long after their classes end.

“I think we could also use The OrganWise Guys in classes like gymnastics or dance during a short break to let them know what they can do to keep their bodies in shape after they go home,” Steinbrock said.

Besides making appearances in the youth camps, The OrganWise Guys have also made an impression on consumers in the special populations program.

According to a report released by the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Department of Disability and Human Development College of Applied Health Sciences, children with disabilities are at greater risk of becoming obese because they are physically less active.

Annette Deghand, Special Populations supervisor, says it is important that the special populations have the same lifestyle opportunities as other populations.

“I think the aspect of health and nutrition is a vital part of everyone’s lifestyle,” Deghand said. “Just as with everything else, I want the special populations to have the

same lifestyle as other populations.”

With The OrganWise Guys available in the special populations camps and programming over the summer, Deghand has seen just how powerful the program can be.

“The OrganWise Guys are able to meet them at a level that is very easy for them to understand,” Deghand said. “They become more vocal when they see an unhealthy option and are beginning to talk about good and bad food choices.”

The OrganWise guys program has become a very useful tool in educating the community about health and nutrition. Although funded by a grant, Deghand wants to make sure the program continues.

“Once the grant is over it is important to sustain and continue this program,” Deghand said. “I want to utilize The OrganWise Guys as much as possible and expose as many kids and parents to it as we can.”

With the new program in place, Lawrence Parks and Recreation is building a foundation for the future to fight obesity and help the Lawrence community continue to be active. With the increased demand for trails and parks, Steinbrock sees how committed Lawrence is to an active lifestyle. Educating youth has always been a part of LPRD’s commitment to the community, and as Steinbrock says, it will continue for years to come.

“We are invested in this program and the community,” Steinbrock said. “It will continue, and we are always striving to find new ways to help benefit the community.”