



Fat Buster

Principal Yvonne Sanders-Butler helms the only sugar-free school in the country.

THE DRIVERS PULLED the Coca-Cola truck to the front door of the gym at Browns Mill Elementary and Magnet School in Lithonia one sultry afternoon. They had barely stepped out of the vehicle before staffer Larry Shannon sprinted into principal Yvonne Sanders-Butler's office with the same urgency as if a fire alarm had sounded in a kindergarten classroom.

"Dr. Butler, you've got to come quick, they're trying to put a Coke machine in our school" was all he could blurt out before Sanders-Butler practically leaped over her desk and began running to the gym where the men were attempting to haul in the massive soda machines.

"We're just doing our job, ma'am," they explained as Sanders-Butler

approached. "The county has a contract with Coca-Cola to put these machines in all of the schools."

"No you're not," she retorted, frantically dialing the number of the DeKalb County School System. "We're a sugar-free school. You just can't do this."

Who knew that growing up in sweltering Mississippi would ever come in handy, but it did. It endowed Sanders-Butler with an unusually high tolerance for hot weather. As the temperature climbed in the gymnasium, the men—waiting impatiently for her to clear their path—began getting uncomfortable.

"The hotter it got, the better they looked," quips Sanders-Butler, conjuring memories of the brawny men drenched in perspiration. "They got more and

more annoyed until finally one of them broke down and said, 'Well, *technically* you would be within the contract if we filled the machine with Dasani water. It *is* a Coke product.'"

It was as if the men had doused the feisty Sanders-Butler with a bottle of that Dasani. Her agitation dissipated and she immediately allowed them to proceed with their work.

That's just one of the many battles Sanders-Butler has faced as a warrior on the frontlines in the fight against childhood obesity, a struggle that has led her to helm the *only* sugar-free school in the country. Eleven years ago, after a near-fatal health scare of her own, Sanders-Butler adopted healthier ways and soon decided to turn her new lifestyle into a critical learning experience for students at her South DeKalb magnet school for high achievers.

She banned all refined sugars—including candy and soft drinks—from the vending machines, got the cafeteria staff to serve more nutritious meals, instituted a daily fitness program, and added workout classes for the faculty.

"It was not easy—it's still not. Parents don't want to hear that they need to do something differently, but the bottom line is, there is no school policy that you've got to allow cake," says Sanders-Butler, a fifty-something veteran educator whose caramel complexion, doe eyes, and pixie haircut make her look like a mature version of singer Toni Braxton. "We start the first three minutes of each class with a stretch to help get more oxygen to the brain, we reworked our student fitness program, and I even got a personal trainer and set up after-school exercise classes for faculty and staff."

Sure, some students and faculty shed pounds and got in better physical shape, but Sanders-Butler says the school also experienced an unexpected dramatic drop in discipline problems and a sharp increase in academic achievement.

"Math and reading test scores improved by 15 percent and discipline referrals



dropped by 28 percent,” says Sanders-Butler of Browns Mill, DeKalb’s only School of Excellence in 2005 and a recent National Blue Ribbon School.

Sugar-free school sounds great, but like many health initiatives—even on a personal level—it is easier said than done. Especially when so much of childhood seems tied to sweet treats. Remember indulging in Honey Buns, sundaes, and Blow Pops?

Not so for Sanders-Butler’s students. None of that junk food is allowed on the premises. That means no cookies, no cake, no Sunny Delight, and as the school’s food service manager, Valerie Johnson, learned the hard way during her first week on the job, not even syrup for the pancakes (they top theirs with fruit or apple sauce instead).

The “Coke” machine at Browns Mill is filled only with water and 100 percent fruit juice. There isn’t a trace of mystery meat or gloppy casseroles or even chocolate milk on lunch trays—only chicken or turkey hot dogs with whole-wheat buns, baked sweet potatoes, baked chicken, and lots of veggies, water, and fruit. Drop off a cake for little Johnny to celebrate his birthday with his class and you’ll leave feeling

like a drug dealer pushing crack.

“One time, this woman tried to deliver forty cupcakes to a class from a parent,” recalls Sanders-Butler. “From the moment she got out of the car people were giving her strange looks. The kids were like, ‘What’s that? We can’t have that.’ The woman was so embarrassed. We told her she couldn’t bring that in here.”

Instead of ice cream and doughnuts, parents drop off grocery bags piled high with fruit, yogurt, and granola bars. They are required to sign a contract agreeing to uphold the school’s nutritional standards. Students are taught in class and through the onsite mock “grocery store” how to decode often-confusing nutrition labels.

For years, Sanders-Butler has been ahead of the curve, taking on childhood obesity before it became the popular cause that prompted former President Bill Clinton to spearhead the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, an organization he created to combat diabetes and childhood obesity. Earlier this year, he even tapped TV cooking guru Rachael Ray to help his cause and whip up healthy snack recipes for kids.

One thing’s for sure: It’s a serious problem that continues to gain attention as national statistics indicate that about 66 percent of U.S. adults are either overweight or obese. In just two decades, the number of overweight American children ages six to eleven has doubled—for teen-

24%

THE NUMBER OF GEORGIA THIRD-GRADERS WHO ARE OBESE—ALMOST FIVE TIMES HIGHER THAN THE NATIONAL RATE OF 5%, ACCORDING TO A 2006 STUDY.

“By the age of four I was a full-blown sugar addict,” she says. “By thirteen, when the other girls were looking for boyfriends, I was looking for a good pound cake recipe. I saw the same habits developing in my students, and I didn’t want them to go through what I did.”

agers, tripled. The 2003–2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) concluded that 25 percent of obese adults were overweight as children. The study also found that children who are overweight before age eight tend to face more severe obesity as an adult, underscoring the importance of Sanders-Butler’s preventive measures.

Those numbers are old news for Sanders-Butler, whose commitment to the cause is personal. She was researching her doctoral dissertation in Sarasota, Florida, in 1996 when a throbbing headache sent her to the emergency room. Her blood pressure was dangerously high—200 over 140—and doctors confirmed she had nearly suffered a stroke.

“I knew my son and husband would miss me, but when I thought about my \$2 million life insurance policy, I wondered just how long my husband would mourn me,” recalls Sanders-Butler, laughing. “I knew his second wife probably wouldn’t have to work. So I told God that if he would allow me to live, I would dedicate my life to spreading this message.”

She kept her promise. Along with taking her doctor’s advice to change her eating habits and work out, she’s also penned books, including *Healthy Kids*, *Smart Kids*, which chronicles her Browns Mill efforts, and *Dessert Lover’s Choice*, a recipe book for naturally sweet desserts.

She founded Ennovy Inc., a company that provides comprehensive health and wellness intervention, and she launched the Wellness Behavior Management Program at her undergrad alma mater, Jackson State University.

Although proud of her accomplishments, Sanders-Butler is the first to admit that changing lifelong habits wasn't easy—especially for someone who grew up in Yazoo County, Mississippi, on an unhealthy diet of fattening soul food and sweets.

“By the age of four I was a full-blown sugar addict,” she says. “By thirteen, when the other girls were looking for boy-friends, I was looking for a good pound cake recipe. I saw the same habits developing in my students, and I didn't want them to go through what I did.”

Adjusting to a sugar-free environment has its stresses, but overall, parents and students have embraced Sanders-Butler's efforts. “It's an academically high-achieving school, but what we've learned from Dr. Butler about health has been best for him,” says V-103 radio personality Joyce Littel of her son Jamal, a fifth-grader. “I've seen an improvement in his behavior. He used to love Pop-Tarts. Now he's all about fruit.”

Sixth-grader Kristen Peagler can relate. “Our food is really good—the fruit, bananas, baked chicken, and rice. It's better because we get more nutrients.”

Fifth-grader Jeremy Wyckoff isn't as optimistic. Between overzealous bites of an apple at lunchtime, he quietly mumbles about not being allowed to have candy at school. In the same breath, however, he points out the twenty-two grams of sugar on the back of his milk carton to his classmate, Larry Stephens. How many eleven-year-olds would think to do that? More evidence, it seems, that Sanders-Butler's efforts are working.

Still, the “sugar buster” of sorts remains modest about her success. “We all have a job to do, a responsibility for the future generation,” Sanders-Butler says. “I'm just doing my part.” ■