

ALMA ZAPATA

BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELOR WIC PROGRAM



For years, Alma Zapata carried a concern that lingered quietly in the background of her life.

She had watched diabetes affect the people closest to her. Her father died from complications related to the disease. Her mother also lives with diabetes. As a young girl, Zapata struggled with her weight, and as the years passed, the family history that once seemed distant began to feel increasingly personal.

Then came a doctor's appointment that sparked a new determination.

About two years ago, Zapata, a breastfeeding peer counselor with the WIC Program, weighed 225 pounds. During a visit with her physician, she received difficult news: she was on the verge of becoming diabetic and might need medication if changes weren't made soon.

For some, that kind of warning can feel overwhelming. For Zapata, it became a turning point.

"I didn't want to go that route," she recalled.

The decision she made afterward was surprisingly simple. She started walking. Not running marathons. Not following an extreme diet. Not chasing a quick fix. She started by focusing on her daily steps.

At the time, the Wellness Program's Step It Up Challenges were gaining momentum among employees. The walking challenges offered structure, accountability, and a goal to work toward. For Zapata, they became the foundation of something much larger.

"It is challenging to break habits and make a healthy change, but it's worth it."

The first few pounds came off. Then a few more.

As she gained confidence, she began making additional changes. She increased her daily activity and gradually transformed the way her family approached food. Vegetables became more common at the dinner table. Carbs and sweets were reduced. Protein-rich meals became a priority.

The changes were intentional, but they were not dramatic. They were sustainable. That distinction mattered.

Like many people who struggle with weight loss, Zapata had experienced the cycle before. She would lose weight, gain it back and become discouraged when results did not come quickly enough.

This time was different.

She stopped focusing on immediate results and started focusing on consistency.

“I learned to be patient and to be consistent,” she said. “In the past, I would get discouraged right away when I wouldn’t see results.”

That shift in mindset proved just as important as any dietary change.

“I don't want [my children] to go through the same path that I've gone through.”

Today, Zapata has lost approximately 55 pounds, bringing her weight down from 225 pounds to about 170. More importantly, she is no longer in the diabetic range that once concerned her doctor.

The transformation has improved far more than her weight.

Before making lifestyle changes, Zapata often felt exhausted. She experienced frequent headaches, swollen knees and aches throughout her body. Today, many of those symptoms are gone.

“It’s a big change as far as my health,” she said.

She also credits her healthier lifestyle with helping her perform better at the office.

“If I feel good, I can do a better job,” she said.

Zapata wanted to improve her health so she could enjoy a better quality of life and be

present for her children. She also wanted to help them develop healthier habits and avoid some of the challenges she experienced growing up.

As she made changes, she encouraged her daughters to become more active and make healthier choices. Family meal planning became part of the process, with a greater focus on fresh foods and balanced meals.

The positive impact extended beyond her immediate household.

Her husband and son, who work out of state, often share their healthier food choices with her. Zapata encourages them to continue making positive decisions and celebrates their progress.

Her mother has also embraced a healthier lifestyle. Together, they find opportunities to stay active, and Zapata said her mother has lost weight as well.

What began as one person’s effort to improve her health has influenced those around her. The same can be said for her workplace.

Zapata credits the support she receives from coworkers and wellness initiatives for helping her stay on track. She has participated in nearly every county step challenge and said the challenges provide motivation and accountability.

“When the challenge is going on, you push yourself,” said Zapata.

Within the WIC Program, employees regularly encourage one another to participate in wellness activities and stay active. New employees often become interested after seeing coworkers support one another and

celebrate progress.

Rather than convincing others to participate, Zapata believes people notice the changes.

“They see your attitude,” she said. “They see how you’re always wanting to keep moving.”

Today, Zapata continues working toward her health goals, but her focus is no longer on a number on a scale. Instead, she is focused on maintaining her health, preventing future complications, and enjoying life with her family.

For anyone considering making a lifestyle change, her advice reflected the lessons she has learned through experience.

Changing habits is difficult. Progress takes time. There will be setbacks and moments of frustration. But the effort is worth it.

For Zapata, wellness is not about appearance. It is not about reaching a perfect number on a scale. It’s about health. It is about being present for the people who matter most. It is about creating a future that looks different from the past.

And it all started with a doctor’s warning and a decision to take the first step.

