

WELLNESS CHAMPION

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MARIA LUISA BRIERE

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If you've visited the Department of Human Resources in the past year, you've likely been greeted by Maria Luisa Briere. As an administrative assistant, she manages the department's purchases, accounts, and other needs.

But Briere's dedication to fitness and health has not gone unnoticed among her colleagues, who often seek her advice on more than just paperwork.

"I try to encourage them," Briere said. "They ask me, 'What are you eating?' and I show them or tell them. I'm always happy to encourage people to make good choices for their breakfast, lunch, or dinner. If they ask, I'm more than happy to help them stay accountable."

However, Briere's focus on health wasn't always there. About 10 years ago, she was busy raising her three children, with her oldest in middle school and her youngest still a toddler. She often felt she didn't have time to focus on herself. Despite numerous attempts to start dieting and exercising, she struggled to maintain her efforts.

"I didn't have the resources or the right information," she said. "I was very hard on myself and very strict. I lost a lot of weight, but it wasn't healthy."



Briere recalls turning to social media for dieting and fitness advice.

"Sometimes it can be deceiving," she said. "The pictures or videos you see on your phone – it's not like that. You just have to focus on yourself, your goals, and take it day by day."

Born and raised in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, Briere found some differences in the foods of the Rio Grande Valley compared to her hometown.

"I was very hard on myself and very strict. I lost a lot of weight, but it wasn't healthy."

"I didn't know about charro beans until I moved here! I grew up eating black beans," she recalled. "We didn't eat many flour tortillas, just corn tortillas."

Moving to the U.S. at 22 was a bit of a culture shock, but Briere embraced it wholeheartedly. At home, she encourages her husband and children to find a balance between food and activity.

"My husband is an athlete and works in law enforcement, so he needs to stay in shape. He's always doing fitness tests," she said. "Nutrition-wise, he tries, but I'm there to encourage him to eat healthy."

Her children are also active in sports and happily eat whatever she cooks. About 18 months ago, when Briere started working for Hidalgo County, a coworker told her about the Employee Wellness Program. Intrigued, she tried the in-body scale and found her results eye-opening.

“The Wellness Program have a whole package. Why not take advantage of that and learn from it?”

She learned about a gym membership discount through the county's medical insurance and decided to join. At the time, the gym next door to the office was covered by the insurance, further motivating her to stick to her fitness routine.

Briere now prioritizes her workouts during her lunch break.

"From Monday to Friday, I stick to my plan. I meal prep, so after the gym, I quickly eat something with protein and veggies. I have a snack during the day, and then a big plate when I get home," she explained.

When it comes to occasional office treats like cookies, birthday cake, or breakfast tacos, Briere believes there's nothing wrong with enjoying small pieces of those foods, but as long as you balance the rest of your meals that day.

"If you have a little piece of cake, maybe cut something out of your dinner," she advised. "Sometimes I say no because I know I'll enjoy something more on the weekend. You just have to find balance."

Given Briere's extraordinary dedication to health, it was only fitting for her director to appoint her as the department's Wellness Ambassador. In this role, she promotes everything the Employee Wellness Program releases, including monthly campaigns, events, and challenges. Ambassadors are also encouraged to create health initiatives for their department.

Briere has coordinated short 15-minute workouts during employees' breaks, offering one in the morning and one in the afternoon. She finds workout videos on YouTube and plays them in a training room. This initiative has been very successful, with employees joining each day regularly.

The Employee Wellness Program has helped Briere find balance in her diet and workouts. She's worked with Kristina Schmidt, the registered dietitian, to start a meal plan, and with Sebastian Buitron for an efficient 30-minute workout plan. "The wellness challenges throughout the year also keep me motivated," she added.

Briere's mental health and motivation have vastly improved compared to all those years ago when she started her wellness journey.

"When you start working out or have a healthy meal, you feel like, 'Man, I did it today. So tomorrow, let's do it again.'"

Every day you have to find discipline and you have to be motivated. Nobody else is going to motivate you daily. You have to find that motivation. Why are you doing this? I'm doing it for my health, for me, so I can feel better – mentally feel better," she explained. "Emotionally and spiritually I have grown and you learn from mistakes. You have to be positive, even when things go wrong."

She encourages others not to focus solely on the numbers on a scale but to understand their body composition – the percentage of the body's fat and muscle tissues.

The resources provided through the Hidalgo County Employee Wellness Program have been a blessing, according to Briere.

"You guys have a whole package. Why not take advantage of that and learn from [the Wellness Program]?" she said. "Also share with our coworkers. Share with our family. Be that example at home."

For those feeling overwhelmed about improving their health, Briere offers simple advice. "If you want a 30-minute workout, you can do that. If you are more like me that I want a meal plan that tells you: breakfast, snack, lunch, snack, dinner. You can get that [via the County's Wellness Program]," Briere stated. "You can make good choices. There's no excuse."

