



Building Our Family's Foundation ONE PARK PROGRAM AT A TIME

As a stay-at-home mother of three children, the Centerville-Washington Park District parks and programs are vital to our lives. In spring 2006, I joined a program called Stroller Strength. My oldest child was 18 months, and I was an overweight mom. In January of that year, my goal was to finally lose the baby weight I had gained in pregnancy. And so began my love of the park district and its programs!

Jen Brandt, park district recreation coordinator and instructor of Stroller Strength, began educating all participants about the importance of being active and eating healthy foods. Stroller Strength is a program in which caregivers (primarily moms) push strollers while walking, jogging, shuffling and singing nursery rhymes! Jen leads us through cardiovascular exercise to work our heart and lungs and strength training exercises to increase lean muscle mass. While the adults are exercising, our children are babbling back



and forth, sharing toys, mimicking our exercises and finishing up their last few pieces of Cheerios. In the midst of all this activity, Jen regularly shares information

about healthy eating for our families. In a matter of 60 minutes, we have been exercise role models for our children — physically, mentally and emotionally.



When I joined Stroller Strength, my only perceived benefit was increased physical activity for me; however, my children have also benefited greatly from the program. My children (ages 5, 21 months and 2 months) and I have developed friendships that are key to our lives. So key that when family tragedy struck this month, it was my Stroller Strength friends whom I leaned on. My children witness the importance of exercise as a key to mental and physical health. In fact, if you asked my oldest son, Henry, what was important to his mother, I'm almost positive he would say family, friends, God, health and exercise.

Now that my oldest son is 5 and has outgrown his stroller, we have participated in other park district programs such as Kiddie Krafts, Mini Movers, Preschool Nature Series, Hidden Meadows Day Camp, Halloween Mini Trail, Winter Woods Day Camp and Get Out and Play. In fact, since I am in better shape, I even completed the park district's 50th anniversary 5K!

During the past four years, the Park District has improved the quality of life for my family and me. I've lost and maintained a healthy weight, built friendships, learned how to provide healthier food for my family and found an outlet in which to appropriately reduce stress.

The programs in which my sons have participated have exposed them to art, nature

and age-appropriate developmental activities. As an educator (prior to being a mom, I was a teacher of deaf and hard-of-hearing children), I know the importance of teaching in a variety of methods. In Mini Movers, children learn movements that assist in motor development and rhythmic skills while interacting with children their own age. Through Kiddie Krafts, my oldest son was able to develop his fine motor skills to a level in which it no longer is a topic of parent-teacher conferences. My middle son, Andrew, is just beginning to be of an age where he will learn critical social skills by interacting with other children on the playground following Stroller Strength classes. My entire family enjoys visiting different parks for the kids to play or hike. These are just a few of the major benefits to our lives

as the result of quality programs and the preservation of open space. Open space is vital to communities and families.

I will forever be grateful to the Centerville-Washington park district for preserving open space and providing such programs as Stroller Strength. The Park District programs have contributed to the well-being of my family and provided places for our family to enjoy the outdoors. Continued funding for parks and recreation needs to be preserved. In an economy such as this, families are looking for ways to provide entertainment and education for their children. Please remember not only my story but also the stories that have yet to be told.

Submitted by Leah Ann Dabbelt, Centerville, Ohio

