**Paige’s Testimonial about the National Fitness Challenge**

Growing up blind, some physical and developmental milestones for Paige Conley were delayed: Walking, for example. Paige didn’t walk until she was nearly 4 years old, her mother said.

“Paige was on her own time schedule,” Dawn Conley said. “(Even now), she does things when she’s ready.”

It was the same situation with Club VIBES. When Paige’s family first moved to the Knoxville, Tennessee area from Georgia, Paige, a third-grader at the time, didn’t show much interest in meeting new people or putting herself out there.

But Paige’s vision teacher told the family about Club VIBES -- a nonprofit organization that provides free mentoring services for visually impaired or blind youth, and their parents and guardians -- and Dawn was intrigued. Still, she didn’t push the issue with Paige.

But then a light seemed to switch on, seemingly overnight. In January, Paige was interested.

“I assumed when she was ready, she’d say so,” Dawn said. “And she did.”

Perhaps that’s one of the many things universal about kids everywhere. They do things on their own timeframe -- when they are truly ready.

And for someone who didn’t walk until she was nearly 4 years old, Paige has been hitting the pavement especially lately, as part of the National Fitness Challenge with Club VIBES. The 13-year-old loves wearing a Fitbit and logging her steps.

“It vibrates!” said Paige of the wearable technology.

To rewind for a moment, Paige was given the Fitbit as part of the National Fitness Challenge, which was established in 2011, and has impacted the lives of more than 3,000 people who are blind and visually impaired across the U.S.

The overall goal of the Challenge remains the same every year: to raise the physical activity level of each participant, with the goal of engaging in 30 minutes of moderate physical activity and 10,000 steps a day.

And that’s exactly what the Challenge has done for Paige -- it’s raised her activity level. But it’s also so much more than just that: the Challenge has given way to a lifestyle change for the entire Conley family.

“Do you have a Fitbit too?” we asked Paige’s mom.

“Well, yes,” Dawn said. “I have to keep up with Paige! It’s changed our entire family dynamic.”

Sometimes, Paige and Dawn go on walks with Club VIBES. Other times, the Conleys will stroll as a family. Paige has an 18-year-old brother in high school. Although he works full-time on top of his classwork, his Saturday mornings are free, Dawn said.

“So he walks with us,” she said. “We haul Dad along too, when he’s home.”

Paige is the youngest member currently involved with Club VIBES. But another girl, a freshman in high school, is similar in age to Paige, so it’s nice to have a friend to walk with, as well.

Here’s how the Fitness Challenge works, in relation to the club: Anthem Foundation awarded the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes grant funding, as it has for the fifth year in a row -- and USABA partnered with 13 agencies across the nation -- Club VIBES included -- to recruit participants and provide resources, along with physical activity opportunities, so that participants could reach their daily goals.

The technology plays a key role in motivating and tracking success. The funding from Anthem Foundation provided a Fitbit Flex 2 wearable device to each participant. The Fitbit acts as an accessible way for people to monitor their progress. It also introduces a level of interaction with other participants, as the 13 groups are competing with their fellow team members on active minutes and number of steps each month.

About 25 people are participating in the Challenge with Club VIBES.

As for Paige, she spoke enthusiastically about her Fitbit, saying she liked how it vibrated, signaling she had reached her daily step-goal. And when she realizes she might come up short on a particular day? She hops on the family treadmill.

“But I don’t like the hill feature!” she said with a laugh.

Paige’s voice got excited as she talked about a cruise she and her family were about to embark on, all the way to Mexico. She’s been on a cruise before, so she had an idea of what to expect.

When asked about walking and wearing the Fitbit while on vacation, Paige didn’t miss a beat or hesitate at all.

In fact, her voice was bursting with excitement.

“I’m going to walk on the track, if the boat has one,” Paige said. “And I’ll go to all the different shops.”

The cruise won’t stop her from getting her steps in, Paige said.

Sue Buckley, the president of the board for Club VIBES and a co-founder, along with her husband, called Paige “very dedicated” to the Challenge, and that dedication certainly shows.

Dawn agreed with that assessment of her daughter, adding that this has been a very motivating experience for Paige.

“(It all started because) Paige is a people-pleaser,” Dawn said. “She wants to make other people happy. I’ve been trying to get her healthier -- trying to find ways to get her more active, like in the pool in the summer. But in the winter, there’s not as much to do. We started walking on our own, occasionally.”

And then Buckley brought up the idea of the Challenge. This marks Club VIBES’ first year as a participating organization.

“This challenges our young people, but it also teaches them about the technology, as well as skills like responsibility and organization,” Buckley said. “Those are skills we’re working on anyway -- living skills.”

Buckley asked if Paige would like to join the Challenge, and it was as simple as that.

“Paige agreed,” Dawn said. “That’s Paige.”

So we asked Buckley: Why the interest in Paige’s involvement?

“She’s the youngest in our Challenge, which is admirable. She’s been blind her whole life,” Buckley said. “I wanted to challenge her to be responsible for the Fitbit and setting her goals. She doesn’t understand (all the health aspects involved). The Challenge motivated the whole family. The walking was first and nutrition and diet came next.”

Buckley, who has a background in physical education, said that not only is Paige getting her steps in, but she’s overcoming some issues with her gait. She’s struggled when it comes to walking with her heels together, but now, she’s losing weight and strengthening her legs in the process, Buckley said.

Speaking with the Conleys in mid-April, Dawn said Paige had indeed shed some pounds: 10 pounds, at last check, and 4 inches off her waist.

“And she’s 13, so her body’s changing right now on top of everything else,” Dawn said.

As for the nutrition, which Buckley referred to, Dawn said she had been cooking healthier lately anyway, seeing as Paige’s dad has diabetes.

Paige said she’s feeling great and eating healthier, even adding that the family tried low-carb pizza for dinner last week.

Paige seemed confident she will continue all the walking, well after the Challenge has ended. Her mom agreed, saying it’s been transformational in all kinds of ways -- and it’s strengthened their mother-daughter bond, as well.

“Paige is getting older, so being able to spend time together one on one, outside of homework, or our school routine, or everyday stuff -- and getting out to walk with her and talk with her has been really good,” Dawn said. “I really get a chance to listen to her. She’s growing up so fast.”