



JON M. FLETCHER/The Times-Union

Bill Jones, who works as a graphic artist, lost more than 100 pounds after his computer professor told his class how unhealthful a computer career can be. Jones admits that, in addition to leading a sedentary lifestyle, he was also making some poor food choices. He now works out daily.



The Florida Times-Union

May 26, 2008

Sit down. Log on. Gain weight.

By DIANA MIDDLETON -- The Times-Union,
The Times-Union

John Downs, a professor at Keiser University's Jacksonville campus, teaches his students how to take a computer apart and put it back together again.

He also teaches them how to put their health back together again or how to avoid the problems that come with spending the majority of their working lives tapping away at keyboards.

"Computers create such a sedentary environment," he said. "When I began teaching the class, I also brought up how the work could inadvertently lead to heart disease, diabetes and arthritis."

Downs' idea sprang from his own physical transformation beginning in 2004. And the results include one student who's lost 120 pounds so far.

The sedentary eight-hour routine is one of the contributing factors to the nation's swelling obesity rate, according to the Center for Disease Control. In Florida, up to 24 percent of

adults are obese, according to 2006 CDC data. In 2003, that figure was up to 19 percent. Harris Interactive says computer usage in general has risen from 75 percent of U.S. adults going online in 2006 to 80 percent in 2007.

As companies have thoroughly integrated computers into day-to-day operations, they've questioned whether their employees are too sedentary during the day. But the concept hasn't worked itself into many other computer curriculums yet.

After suggesting ways to combat work-related pounds - such as tried-and-true exercise and portion control - he told students last year to approach him if they wanted more information.

Only one student took him up on his offer.

Bill Jones, an aspiring computer graphic artist, was 356 pounds when he was in Downs' introductory-level class. He couldn't choose his biggest food-related weakness: He admits he had several, from tacos and pizza to Chinese food.

"I used to go to Krystal and order a steamer pack and eat all 24 of them," he said. "And then go straight to sleep."

But he had never considered the impact his chosen career would have on his weight.

"When I began learning about the connection, it was very surprising," he said. "It had never been mentioned before, especially not during class."

Jones had plenty of motivation. He could not kneel down and play with his daughter without getting winded.

"I couldn't go to the zoo and actually walk around without feeling like I was going to die."

He began drinking a gallon of water a day and renting movies like *Fast Food Nation* and *Super Size Me* for inspiration. Exercise-wise, he started slow, walking with his young daughter. He accelerated into full-body workouts five times a week coupled with six small meals a day (mostly brown rice, chicken and veggies). That spawned a job at his local Gold's Gym, where he starts work at 5 a.m. before going to class in the afternoons.

Now he's down to 236 pounds.

Though diet and exercise are an obvious solution to obesity, there are other ways to incorporate weight loss into the workplace, according to Lorraine Lanningham-Foster, an associate consultant at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

"We studied all the things we do that we don't consider to be exercise, but they contribute to overall calories burned," she said. "One of the observations we found is that obese

people are more sedentary, and they are sitting for significantly more time during the workday, which later bleeds into the weekend."

Computer-reliant industries, from programming to the aforementioned graphic design, often have hidden health land mines, with many corporate environments encouraging workers to become engrossed in their computer tasks and to not stray far from the desk.

The point of Mayo's research was to identify small things employees could do to boost energy and burn calories while staying productive. Those activities can range from parking far away from the office's front door, doing chores manually (such as delivering a memo in person instead of via e-mail) and simply walking around the office throughout the day. Just sitting upright instead of slouching burns more calories.

Her colleague, Mayo doctor James Levine, developed a workstation treadmill, a device that marries computing with calorie burning. Other health-related office products out there include exercise balls used as desk chairs and elastic cords that clip to chairs for resistance training.

"People feel like they could never use a treadmill while working," Lanningham-Foster said. "But then they give it a try. We're not talking about running, but walking at a very low speed - usually between half a mile and 1 mile per hour. You burn calories without distraction."

Some have built on-site gyms to lower insurance costs.

Keiser instructor Downs has started a "fit club" weekly meeting for students who need inspiration.

The meetings also include students from other disciplines, including nursing and radiology. For Downs, the goal is to show how easily workplace complacency can become a bigger pants size.

"My dad used to work in manual labor, and he always felt a little cursed," he said. "So when I started working an office job, I thought, 'Wow, I can sit in my office.' But then I started gaining 10 pounds a year."

That's why the weekly meetings have an Alcoholics Anonymous-type of feel, he said.

"We all need the inspiration," he said.

diana.middleton@jacksonville.com,

(904) 359-4404

This story can be found on Jacksonville.com at http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/052608/lif_282236396.shtml.
