

Fitness industry wooes Black consumers

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) - Against the odds, Elaine Green is calling on a powerful ally to help stay fit: Jesus Christ. A recent evening found the 51-year-old at Norfolk's First Baptist Church, shimmying and sliding through a physical fitness workout set to a gospel beat. "Amaaaazing grace," — left leg up, and down. "How sweet the sound," — step left, step right. "That saved a wretch, like meeeee," — and squat, two, three. By the

blood of the lamb, she's gonna win the battle of the bulge.

Keen-eyed marketers in the fitness industry are spicing up their workout offerings with a touch of gospel, soul and hip-hop, tailoring the music and dance in a direct appeal to Black consumers.

"They found there was a niche audience to tap into," said Keecha Harris, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

That's because nationwide, Black waistlines are expanding. One 2002 study by the Centers for Disease Control found 78 percent of Black women ages 20 to 74 were overweight, with more than 50 percent qualifying as obese.

Solutions are showing up on store shelves and TV screens. At Wal-Mart, Benita Perkins' "Taking It to a Higher Ground" DVD sets step aerobics to a background of Kenny Bobien and other

popular Black gospel artists. On the Black-aimed TV One network, fitness guru Donna Richardson Joyner sets brisk workouts to live R&B.

And from New York to Los Angeles, hip-hop yoga classes like the one Arizona-based Ian Lopatin teaches entice Blacks who prefer trying the "downward facing dog" position set to Snoopy Dogg.

"It has roots in their culture," explained Lopatin, who tours the country teach-

ing. "If you're doing yoga to Tupac, it doesn't seem so foreign anymore."

Tailoring health messages to Blacks is a common-sense response to an obvious market, said Lucille Perez, a health director with the NAACP. In the past, she said, marketers didn't see any value in expanding beyond White consumers.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to say if we are a population that is disproportionately obese... why

wouldn't I develop a market and market to this population," she said.

But packaging fitness for Black consumers comes with challenges.

In the mid-1990s, University of Pennsylvania epidemiology professor Shiriki Kumanyika interviewed 53 Black men and women and found that many viewed exercise as excess work that could do more harm than good.

Some thought it would aggravate high blood pressure and add to stress — already running high for many Blacks. These men and women overemphasized rest, some calling sleep even more important than exercise. That "rest ethic" goes back to slavery, Kumanyika said.

"Stories that are passed down through generations are that people were brought here and forced to work," she said. "It's kind of logical to think that the idea of not having to do this physical labor would be something that would be valued."

Those surveyed also thought Blacks worked disproportionately strenuous (See Fitness, Page 5)

Group: Race bias mars post-Katrina renting

DALLAS (AP) - A fair-housing watchdog has accused five apartment complexes in Texas, Florida and Alabama of discriminating against Hurricane Katrina evacuees who are Black. The complaints filed with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development were based on a telephone survey by the National Fair Housing Alliance.

The group said White callers posing as hurricane victims were treated more favorably than Black applicants in 66 percent of its inquiries. NFHA president Shanna Smith said the organization used linguistic profiling to choose its testers, saying the test makes the race

of the caller "pretty clear."

The report, released last week, said Blacks were less frequently told about available apartments, didn't have phone messages returned as promptly and generally had a more difficult time getting information from agents.

The complaints against three apartment complexes in Dallas, one in Birmingham, Ala., and one in Gainesville, Fla., also ranged from Whites receiving lower rates to apartment agents informing Black callers of no availability, moments after telling White callers that units were available.

Complaints against two Dallas complexes, both owned by Atlanta-based

Gables Residential, include allegations that agents mentioned specific income requirement for Black callers but not for Whites.

Gables spokesman David Margulies said the company was caught off-guard by the report, adding that Gables has provided housing for more than 470 hurricane victims and donated \$50,000 in hurricane-earmarked aid to the Red Cross.

"We are surprised and dismayed by these allegations," Margulies said. "That is not how we do business."

St. Louis-based Michelson Realty, owners of the other Dallas complex, did not immediately return messages left at their offices.

Landlords who are found guilty of discriminating against applicants can face fines up to \$11,000 per complaint, said Bryan Greene, HUD's director of policy for the office of fair housing.

Greene said HUD has received about 60 complaints from hurricane-displaced apartment seekers since Katrina forced tens of thousands to evacuate in August. He said some cases have been resolved, adding that HUD tries to settle issues before getting courts involved.

The NFHA's test included

65 sets of calls to apartment complexes in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Texas. Smith said each complex was called three times within a short period, twice by White callers and once by a Black caller.

Smith said more complaints could be filed but said the group will wait for HUD to investigate before taking any further action.

The Washington, D.C.-based alliance is a consortium of 120 private, nonprofit fair housing organizations and civil rights groups from 37 states.

FEMA

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sands of Katrina evacuees.

Government attorneys said in court filings last week that Duval's order is unclear as to whether it covers evacuees who have failed to apply yet for FEMA assistance, and whether FEMA can require evacuees who are staying in the hotels to identify themselves by registering.

As government lawyers sought a clarification from the judge, attorneys for evacuees expressed concern that amid the uncertainty, some people who are entitled to stay in the hotel program might be evicted.

"If you can't be certain who's in the hotel, it's indicative of the fact that you may be

evicting some of our clients," said Danny Greenberg, one of the attorneys pressing the lawsuit.

FEMA spokeswoman Nicol Andrews on Monday: "We've always said we're not going to put anyone on the street." Andrews stressed that FEMA does not intend to stop funding for any evacuee whose eligibility for further assistance had not been determined.

The Red Cross began the hotel program in September. FEMA funded the program from its inception and took over its operation from the Red Cross in October. As of mid-December, FEMA was footing the bill for an estimated 41,000 rooms, and the program had cost the agency \$350 million.

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