

Working out at work

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | **Posted: Thursday, August 11, 2016 6:00 am**

NILES — At Massimo’s restaurant in Niles, pizza, pepperoni and pedaling go together.

That’s thanks to a grant from Be Healthy Berrien, which helped the business’s owners buy bicycles to encourage their employees to get more exercise.

It didn’t take much to convince Massimo’s owner Cindy Cataldo to get on board with the program.

“Are you kidding? I love Be Healthy Berrien!” enthused Cataldo, a member of the Niles parks board who worked with Be Healthy Berrien to install exercise equipment along the riverfront trail that passes by her restaurant.

Massimo’s is one of six Niles employers participating in the wellness project. The others are the Niles District Library, Brentwood at Niles, Fisher Innovative Technologies, Inertia Cycleworks and Inner Journey Healing Arts Center.

Heather Cole, director of Be Healthy Berrien, said her organization reasoned that most adults spend one-third of their day at work, and that this was the logical place to create a supportive environment for a more active lifestyle.

In Berrien County, two-thirds of adults don’t get enough aerobic exercise, Cole said. Her organization wants to help residents acquire good habits and to remove barriers so that fitness is the easy choice to make, she said.

The participating employers received \$1,000 and technical support from Be Healthy Berrien. Cataldo bought six bicycles with her funds, including a bright yellow tandem bike, and used her own money to install bike racks and to provide helmets and locks.

She is making the bikes available to her workers before and after work and on breaks, and wants to lend them to other downtown employees and even customers.

Other work sites have purchased exercise equipment and set up fitness rooms that can be used during breaks and after work.

“You can’t go wrong with healthy employees,” said Heather Williamson, administrative manager at the Niles Library, which has purchased a treadmill, weights, elliptical machines that fit under desks, and even a



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Cindy Cataldo, left, owner of Massimo’s Pizza in Niles, and Heather Cole, director of the Be Healthy Berrien, are pictured Wednesday along the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail in Niles. Cataldo was able to buy several new bicycles for her employees through a grant from the program to promote fitness in the workplace.

standing punching bag.

Healthier employees have more energy, are more productive and have fewer sick days, Williamson said.

The library has started walking parties Friday nights open to its employees, their families and pets.

Brandon Steven, the library's community engagement team manager, said he is excited about the walking program. He and his girlfriend are trying to get in shape before their wedding, and having a workplace option is an added incentive, he said.

Williamson said the library surveyed employees to determine what types of exercise options they wanted before creating a plan. Steven came up with the idea for a treadmill.

Be Healthy Berrien introduced the project last fall to about 30 employers at a Niles Chamber of Commerce breakfast, Cole said. Three initially signed on, fewer than what they had hoped for.

Cole said many employers thought that mounting a fitness program would be too expensive and time-consuming. She realized that she would need to educate them that this was not the case, as well as extolling the benefits.

Cindy Cataldo said her employees are pumped up about the bikes. "They said 'Oh my gosh, this is just the coolest thing!'"

Along with creating healthier workers, Cataldo thinks that promoting outdoor activities is a way to increase community pride and to keep young people in the area.

Massimo's will soon move to a new location along the riverfront. Cataldo is considering sponsoring volleyball teams and other activities that are fun and healthy.

Heather Cole's own office at United Way started a fitness challenge to get employees to exercise for 30 minutes, five days a week. They also have a garden where employees can work on their breaks and take home fresh produce.

The current grant is focusing on the Niles area. Cole said that if the program is successful, Be Healthy Berrien would like to expand it to other places.

Cole said the long-term goal of Be Healthy Berrien, funded in part by a Michigan grant, is to reduce health care costs by eliminating illnesses associated with a lack of exercise and an unhealthy diet.

Be Healthy Berrien, founded in 2010, is a partnership between the Berrien County Health Department, Lakeland Health, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, United Way of Southwest Michigan and the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph and Niles-Buchanan YMCAs. Its mission is to reduce obesity and chronic illness by promoting regular exercise and healthy eating.

The organization has a free Worksite Wellness Toolkit available to all employers who want to create their own program. It is available at www.BeHealthyBerrien.org/worksite_wellness.

The website also lists locations where residents can enjoy outdoor recreation and buy fresh, locally grown food.

Contact: jmatuszak@TheHP.com, 932-0360, Twitter: [@HPMatuszak](https://twitter.com/HPMatuszak)