



WOMEN STUN NOTRE DAME

Mountaineers defeat Irish, 65-63 **SPORTS | 1B**

'WE'RE LIFELONG LEARNERS'

Hands-on PR chief marks milestone year **INNERVIEWS | 5A**



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THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

'I WANT TO TELL PEOPLE: THIS IS POSSIBLE'



“Food was ... like fuel for your car. Except I have to admit, I was a whole lot more careful about what I put in my car.”

— Dannie Cunningham

KATE LONG | Gazette

Dannie Cunningham, 61, has dropped 56 pounds and cut his blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol down to normal range by working with a diabetes counselor. “I will tell anybody who will listen that you can beat diabetes — and even keep yourself from getting it — by watching what you eat and staying on the move,” Cunningham said.

You can prevent, control diabetes

By Kate Long
Staff writer

BELLEVILLE — Dannie Cunningham, 61, climbed the steep hill behind his house, crunching briskly through oak leaves, whacking weeds with his walking stick. “Maybe I’ll get lucky and flush out a rabbit,” he said.

He was headed for his hunting camp at the top of the second hill, hustling up the path, laughing and teasing a reporter trailing along behind him. “I hear you puffing a bit there, don’t I?” he called over his shoulder.

This is a man who beat back diabetes and chopped his blood pressure and cholesterol in half.

Experts have advised West Virginia to establish statewide diabetes management programs to bring down the state’s high chronic disease rates.

Cunningham can testify that they work. “Last year, I couldn’t have climbed like this,” he called. “I owe it to Devena.”

Devena Moore is one of the state’s too-few diabetes reduction counselors. “I lucked into her program,” Cunningham said.

He stopped to philosophize. “Now I’ll ask you a question,” he said, jabbing the air with his finger. “Why aren’t we as careful with our bodies as we are our cars? I’m a stickler when it comes to my cars and four-wheel-



One in three adult West Virginians is now obese. Dannie Cunningham — at 237 pounds in this 2009 photo — is no longer among the one in three. “I lowered that statistic a little bit,” he said.

Courtesy photo

ers, stuff like that. I change the oil when I’m supposed to. I change the air filters. But before Devena, I was nowhere near as careful to maintain my own body. Why is that?”

Not missing a beat, he shrugged and started back up the path. “Now I’ll tell you how I got in trouble,” he said. “After my first wife died, I spent eight years as a bachelor. That’s when I packed on the pounds.”

He was working at a glass plant as he had for 20 years, he said, mostly running machines. “I had a long drive to work, so I got used to shoveling the fast food in. I’d eat a

SEE DANNIE, 12A

THE HOPE

'WE CAN BEAT THIS'

By Kate Long
Staff writer

“We can beat this,” said Dr. Alan Ducatman, interim dean of the West Virginia University School of Public Health. “If we decide from top to bottom that we’re going to do this, we can do it.”

West Virginia occupies a top slot on almost every awful health ranking: diabetes, heart disease, stroke, kidney disease and others.

“There’s a new feeling that it doesn’t have to be that way,” said Christina Mullins, director of the state Office of Maternal Child and Family Health. “There is new energy to lower these numbers. There’s a sense of urgency.”

One in four West Virginia fifth-graders have high blood pressure, cholesterol and obesity, well above the national average.

As millions in health reform dollars roll into West Virginia, “we have the chance of a lifetime to make it different,” said Dr. Rahul Gupta, director of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department.

SEE HOPE, 13A

SCHOOL BOARD

New faces seek seats

By Amy Julia Harris
Staff writer

As members of the Kanawha County school board face mounting community discontent from Charleston’s West Side over renaming West Side Elementary School after Mary C. Snow, one woman at the forefront of the renaming battle has decided to throw her hat into the upcoming school board election.

Linda Moon Ealy, the wife of Rev. James D. Ealy, filed to run for the school board as a way to provide a “listening ear and understanding to the community.” Ealy will challenge incumbent Robin Rector for her seat.

“It was in the face of some of the opposition of the changing of the name of the school [that I decided to run] and I feel like we need more of a voice on the board because there’s some disrespect and disregard for the community,” said Ealy, a 15-year resident of Charleston’s West Side. “There has been a lot of misunderstanding and I thought

SEE SCHOOLS, 13A

W.VA. LEGISLATURE

Critics say bill goes too far

Proposal bans raising funds during session

By Lawrence Messina
The Associated Press

West Virginia would not be the first state to ban its legislators from raising funds while in session, as a pending measure proposes, but critics say the bill’s current wording presents several unintended or unfair consequences.

State Sen. Mike Green said fundraising during last year’s special primary election for governor helped prompt him to introduce the legislation. While his bill would not apply to that office, the six Democrats and eight Republicans who ran in 2011 included five lawmakers.

These legislators attracted 35 percent of the \$909,000 raised by all candidates during that year’s regular session. The lawmakers who ran also held nine of the 22 fundraising events that coincided with the

SEE CRITICS, 3A



Two years from now — if the Supreme Court doesn't strike the federal health-care law down — more than 100,000 West Virginians will get health insurance. That alone should lower the numbers, Gupta said. "People will be able to get checkups, and we'll catch a lot more diabetes and heart disease early."

"It's an exciting time to be working in health care," Mullins said. "A lot of things are possible that weren't possible before."

Federal health-care reform forces agencies to cooperate, she said. "A lot of good is coming from that. People who never talked before are seeing how their pieces fit together, comparing notes, saying, 'Oh! We could work together here.'"

The state Bureau of Public Health and the state Department of Education are meeting regularly to plan for children, she said. DHHR gave the schools a half million for playgrounds. They designed a joint teen pregnancy campaign. They want to let residents of communities with no gyms use school gyms after school.

That kind of cooperation adds up to healthier communities, said Dick Wittberg, director of the Mid Ohio Valley Health Department. "Doctors or health departments can't do it alone. The schools can't do it alone. County government can't do it alone. Everyone has a part."

In 2009, Wittberg's health department got a \$4.5 million federal grant to demonstrate what communities can do. They tried to choose things that would be possible without a big grant, he said.

They helped start school mountain bike and running clubs. They organized farmers markets in six counties and installed bike racks all over Parkersburg. Volunteers from the West Virginia Mountain Bike Association cut a web of biking and walking trails through six counties.

They convinced two Wal-marts, three Foodlands, and now several Kroger stores to start healthy checkout aisles "so customers can have the choice of a banana instead of candy chips."

Parkersburg is also home to the River City Runners and Walkers, a volunteer-run club



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DR. ALAN DUCATMAN

Interim dean of the West Virginia University School of Public Health

with more than 1,000 members that sponsors weekly events for grownups and children. "We're making this a running town," said Sharon Marks, volunteer board president.

"Each of these things may seem small, but they add up to a community where it's easier to live a healthy life," Wittberg said.

Puzzle pieces in the air

By 2025, at the current rate, 61 percent of Americans will be diabetic or pre-diabetic, Johns Hopkins University and others estimate. An estimated 315,000 West Virginians would be diabetic, if that were to happen, and another half million would be pre-diabetic, meaning they have blood sugar close to diabetic.

Diabetes already costs West Virginia more than a billion dollars, according to the American Diabetic Association. The cost will triple in the next 10 years, the CDC estimates.

If that happens, the budget will be swamped and major new taxes or cutbacks will be needed, health care economist Ken Thorpe told the Legislature in November 2011.

His recommendation: Target diabetes. Let people know it is preventable. Diabetes leads to heart disease, stroke and other diseases and is strongly linked with obesity, he noted. "If you lower diabetes, you lower the rest."

His challenge: Help people



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DR. RAHUL GUPTA

Director of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department

help themselves. Set up a network of free prevention courses so any resident can get support and solid advice. Train local people to run the courses.

If West Virginians learn to prevent and control diabetes, he said, the state's long-term picture will improve.

A lot of pieces are in the air, but nobody is really keeping track, said Perry Bryant, director of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care. "They're good pieces, but nobody knows where they all are, how they're going to land or if they'll fit together when they do."

Here are a few:

■ West Virginia's 28 community health centers — the nation's strongest such network — have expanded facilities and labs with stimulus money, getting ready for more patients.

■ Eight new school-based health centers opened in 2011. Eighty schools now have centers. Ten more counties plan to add centers in 2012.

■ More than 1,300 West Virginia doctors now have electronic medical records systems, which let them handle more patients and get patient records from other providers more easily.

■ Three new community health centers are opening in the coalfields, where problems are



"If you lower diabetes, you lower the rest."

KEN THORPE

Professor, Rollins School of Public Health

greatest, but health care scarcer.

■ The Benedum Foundation is pouring millions into West Virginia research projects aimed at reducing chronic disease.

■ Marshall University is training dozens of people statewide to teach chronic disease management courses and has helped several counties set up diabetes coalitions.

■ The School of Osteopathic Medicine in Lewisburg is training hundreds of lay people to be community outreach health workers.

■ West Virginia University's CARDIAC program and Marshall are cooperating on a six-county project aimed at developing effective ways to treat obese children.

■ Dozens of health research projects are running statewide. At least two are aimed at helping private doctors and schools learn better ways to help obese children.

■ In Kanawha County, Keys4HealthyKids is giving grants to local communities that are creating healthier environments.

■ PEIA plans to offer the national Diabetes Prevention Program to its 200,000 members. The agency hopes to set up a special program for children.

■ At least two major hospitals — Charleston Area Medical Center and Camden Clark in Parkersburg — are exploring setting up accountable care organizations, as an alternative to traditional health insurance.

■ Highmark, the state's largest private insurer, is running a major pilot project aimed at find-



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CHRISTINA MULLINS

Director, state Office of Maternal Child and Family Health

ing effective ways to reimburse prevention efforts.

■ State Schools Superintendent Jorea Marple is taking aim at the healthiness of school meals and the amount of physical activity in the school day.

Almost all are fledgling efforts, but the impact could be profound if they pan out," Bryant said.

Two major projects target the 5 percent of patients who cost at least 40 percent of health spending, patients with multiple chronic diseases.

West Virginia Medicaid is asking national Medicaid for permission to create care management teams to work with these patients between doctor visits. The aim: keep them healthier and out of emergency rooms and hospitals. Keep small problems from developing into big, expensive ones.

Medicaid will pay for such teams, as part of health reform. "That's a major shift toward prevention," Bryant said. "Before, they paid only after it became an expensive problem."

Second, West Virginians are in the running for \$33 million in "innovation" money from the federal Centers for Disease Control, to create similar teams for the most expensive Medicare patients.

One such patient easily costs several hundred thousand a year, Thorpe said, so the teams should pay for themselves.

'Nobody's leading the charge'

All this is happening at a dizzying pace, yet nobody is keeping track statewide, much less making sure the right hand knows what the left hand is doing, Bryant said.

Don Perdue, chairman of the House Health and Human Resources Committee, worries about that. "There has to be an overseer who takes all those pieces and fits them together, even glues them together," he said. "Otherwise, we could end up with the same old thing — a lot of services in Charleston, Morgantown and Huntington and nothing in other areas."

The Legislature created the GOHELP agency in 2005 to do that job, Perdue said, "but so far, that has never happened." For at least five months, GOHELP has been without a director.

Dr. Gupta also worries about lack of oversight. "When money on that scale comes into a state like this, someone needs to keep track of the big picture," he said.

"Nobody's leading the charge," said Renate Pore, health policy director for the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. "More than anything, we need central, inspirational leadership."

"We need somebody who inspires individual West Virginians to do their part," she said.

In 2011, the center surveyed 33 top West Virginia health leaders. "They unanimously said West Virginia lacks health care leadership at the top," she said.

If West Virginia has not so far been able to lower its numbers, "it has not been for lack of interest and good-hearted people," said Kim Tieman, who represents the Benedum Foundation. "It has been for lack of coordination, leadership and clear goals."

"We have an amazing chance here," Dr. Bob Walker, West Virginia's higher education vice chancellors for health Sciences, said at a planning meeting for the \$33 million CDC grant. "The people of West Virginia deserve decent health care. If we can't put politics aside and make the most of this chance, we should get out of the way and make room for people who can."

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