

Virtual company teaches healthy habits

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Anyone whose children have ever played soccer knows the routine: The referee blows the whistle, the game ends, and kids in colorful uniforms gather at the sideline for a 500-calorie snack of Cheetos and a sugary Capri Sun drink.

Given that 1 out of 3 American children are overweight or obese, Pleasanton resident Andrea Bloom wants to change this routine. In fact, as a mother of three school-aged children, Bloom was able to eliminate unhealthy post-game snacks for her daughter's soccer team. "We need to think twice before feeding our children high-calorie snacks," said Bloom, noting that such norms have become ingrained not just in youth soccer, but within our entire culture.

Bloom, who is the founder and CEO of ConnectWell, a Pleasanton-based start-up firm, points out that health care spending in the United States accounts for a significant 16% of our gross domestic product, or some 2.3 trillion dollars per year. "Health intervention is long overdue," said Bloom. "We need to incorporate widespread wellness into America's national health culture."

Bloom's vision for ConnectWell began as an observation. A graduate of Harvard Business School, she began her career with LifeScan, a Johnson & Johnson Company that manufactures blood-glucose monitors. At LifeScan, she witnessed firsthand the alarming growth of the national diabetes epidemic. "I saw this disease grow tremendously," Bloom said, "and what was so disturbing was that so many people didn't have to get this disease in the first place." The culprit is poor eating habits and not enough exercise. "I realized we needed to be educating people earlier about type 2 diabetes and its causes so they don't have to get sick in the first place," she said. "We need to focus on prevention rather than treatment."

So Bloom created ConnectWell and invited a team of experts from different regions of northern California to share preventive wellness practices through employer programs. Bloom and her team work with human resource professionals to provide employees with a menu of programs and services that educate and create healthier lifestyles and habits. Bloom said employers embrace this approach because healthier employees are more productive and enjoy a better quality of life.

"Employers are motivated to deliver preventative health care because health care costs keep rising as people develop chronic preventable disease," said Bloom. Because most employees don't have time to gather information on wellness practices, ConnectWell incorporates supportive and proven techniques at the workplace to foster a healthier lifestyle.

Bloom is particularly proud of ConnectWell's organizational structure: "We're a virtual company built from the ground up," said Bloom, who has recruited knowledgeable professionals from a variety of fields without a physical office or significant monetary resources. Experts include Dr. Robert Lustig,

Professor Pediatric Endocrinology at U.C. San Francisco; Dr. Anne Friedlander, Human Biology Professor at Stanford University; Luis Rodriguez, a clinical dietitian at U.C. San Francisco Medical Center; and others.

In addition to working with employers, Bloom is an advocate for food policies that cease subsidizing foods that result in obesity and diabetes: “The scientific data about foods that support good health is rock solid,” Bloom wrote in a letter to the editor in the San Jose Mercury News in June 2011. “We need to align our policies so the economics of food enables people to make healthy choices. When fresh vegetables cost more than French fries, we know there is a problem.”

To learn more, visit www.connectwell.biz <<http://www.connectwell.biz>> .