baked fish; and snacking smart by eating foods with low calorie counts and high health benefits.

PUTTING A PROGRAM INTO PLAY

What's keeping you from working that body? Absolutely nothing. As Greenwood points out in her book, exercise helps you to transform your mind, body, and spirit. "Since I began to work out regularly, I'm loving the body I'm in—not just because my size twelve frame is trimmer and my husband thinks I'm all that, but because I know this is the best me I can be," she writes. "The most satisfying feeling of all comes from those sacred sixty to ninety fitness minutes of oneness with myself. The actions of my body somehow work to magically transform my mind and my spirit. I'm filled with a sense of control and accomplishment that is quite unlike anything I've ever experienced . . . My devotion to exercise has taught me a valuable lesson: Sometimes what's good *for* you is also good *to* you."

Kecia Palmer Cousins agrees that exercise is essential for both physical and mental well-being. She started her company, Aerobicsoul Incorporated, after participating in an aerobics class that I taught at the YWCA in Yonkers. According to her, participating in exercise on a regular basis has been a life-altering event for herself as well as her students:

> *If you'll recall Shellie, I met you the week that you were diagnosed with cancer. I used to host slumber parties for young girls at my house; the gatherings were partially for fun and partially to focus on career and education. So from Friday through Saturday, the young ladies would be in store for an empowering weekend during which women from the community would stop by to talk to them. One of the people I invited was Marie Williams, and she brought*

you to my house that night as her guest. She wanted to cheer you up. Given the circumstances, I thought you had a great attitude.

So when you started teaching aerobics, I started taking your classes to stay fit and support your business. But the classes came to be so much more than I'd anticipated. I was inspired not only through your exercise but also through your story. You went through a miscarriage, were diagnosed with the breast cancer, got out of a bad marriage, and remained positive. I also enjoyed the fellowship with the other ladies. All of these things motivated me to start my own aerobics business. I thought it would be a great way to help the ladies of the community and the members of Unity Baptist Tabernacle in Mount Vernon, New York.

I was right. The program has grown tremendously. We started off with a couple of dumbbells and mats. Now we have a lot of exercise equipment that people in the community have donated because they want to support the program and see the results of the participants. People can't believe the transformations. One husband came to see the class for himself because he didn't believe his wife was actually happy about going to an exercise class every Friday night. There was another woman who initially had trouble walking, but after a few sessions she was actually riding her bicycle to class. Another, who used to come to class regularly, called to tell me she had to stop because she needed to support her husband through treatment after he'd been diagnosed with cancer. After he passed away, she started coming back to class regularly but this time she brought others—her two daughters, her sister, her sister-in-law, and an aunt. It was a way for them to collectively help her through the tragedy in her life, get exercise, and be inspired to keep going every day. It gave them something to look forward to every day.

As part of the criteria for allowing people to take the aerobics class, I find out when they last saw their doctor. This forces women

to look at their own health and face some of the issues they've ignored. We talk about health a lot during the classes and I do one-on-one counseling with the students following the exercise sessions. After a while, people who haven't had a physical checkup decide to go to the doctor to find out about their ailments.

Each person has their own story about what they are going through. As a result of attending the classes, three ladies underwent hysterectomies. One lady took care of a hernia problem that she'd been ignoring. Another got a breast reduction. Our biggest success story was a woman who lost thirty pounds through fasting and exercise, got a new husband, transferred down south through her job, and bought a house. She credits all of these accomplishments to my class because she believes it helped her focus on some of her dreams and goals and go after them. I'm glad to be a part of her transformation. Just recently, she sent me a card telling me that I was special and thanking me for being there when she needed me.

Currently, we have between ten and fifteen people per class. Normally, I teach the class twice a week. Exercise affects people's lives. It makes them focus on things they once ignored. Each session is ended with meditation allowing them to reflect on their day. I give them herbal tea on their way out and tell them to go home and take time for themselves. These are things they could do on their own. But the class forces them to take time out for themselves.

There's no denying that the class has tremendously helped others. But it's been a blessing to me as well. More good things have come out of this exercise program than I could have ever imagined. I've been able to donate a portion of the proceeds from the class back to the church to help them with their other projects. I've grown closer to my husband because the class is an activity that we do together. Although he's not an aerobics teacher, he's there to help me with the equipment, provide some of the ladies with male

insight, and sympathize with them because, at one time, he too was overweight. The people at the church were so impressed with my work that they invited me to do a full-fledged empowerment program for them and I got rave reviews. Furthermore, the meditation and regular exercise helped me have a great pregnancy and peace of mind and to stay centered and calm. The energy I get from the ladies helps me to prioritize my life and health. This was especially important in light of my very stressful job. I am a senior project manager for a major communications firm. I have ten project managers that report to me and we were involved in a number of high-profile projects like restoring telephone services during the 9/11 tragedy. Exercise helps me deal with the stress that I deal with every day, realize that I can still make a difference in other people's lives and put everything in perspective.

Perhaps the biggest lesson I've learned from the experience is that the more you take care of yourself, the more you can do for others. Now, every day I try to share my gifts with others. I feel I have a very privileged life, and exercise helps me give back to the community and myself.

Are you ready to start your workout? Of course you are. Use these tips to get with an exercise program:

- Get a "good bill of health" from your physician and start out at a pace that you're comfortable with.
- Don't wait for motivation. You may never *feel* like exercising if you wait around for the notion. Instead, start exercising whether you want to or not. You need to exercise to preserve your physical and mental health so nothing should prevent you from doing it. Push yourself. Sometimes you have to act first and the inspiration and excitement will follow.

SOUL BEGINNINGS

8 Strategies for Overcoming Life's Challenges

- Pray until something happens
- Rally up support
- Give it up, turn it loose
- Get an attitude of gratitude
- Exercise for healing
- Accept your shortcomings
- Dream on
- Pay it forward

Shellie Anderson-Tazi

Foreword by Terrie Williams
author of *A Plentiful Harvest*