



Photo: Mike Smedley

A Wake-Up Call To Action:

DR. IAN SMITH
HELPS
BLACK AMERICA
LOSE MORE THAN WEIGHT

By Lenora E. Houseworth

M

ost people would agree that a rainy day hardly constitutes an appropriate setting to celebrate. However, in life, there are certain instances where not even Mother Nature's worst can diminish the fact that some things are just too momentous to ignore. An example is African Americans coming together to make a resounding declaration to put on the boxing gloves to fight back in the war to reclaim their health.

Several months after the spring 2007 inception of The 50 Million Pound Challenge national initiative that was created by 38-year-old medical/diet expert Dr. Ian Smith in partnership with the State Farm Insurance Companies, the project had helped more than a quarter million African Americans lose more than one million pounds. To commemorate the benchmark, a huge crowd, including music legend Patti LaBelle, braved unexpected rain last November to gather in front of a well-lit soundstage for a ceremonial "tipping of the scales" at the legendary Adam Clayton Powell State Office Building in Harlem.

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The Challenge is a national call to action for African Americans to take charge of their health by collectively losing 50 million pounds, and consequently, reducing the health risks associated with being overweight. With the help of Dr. Ian, as he's affectionately called, and his vision, African Americans across the nation are making the commitment to change their fate by losing weight to live longer, healthier lives – even in the rain.

Instead of just talking about the obesity problem, Dr. Ian, who also appears on VH1's popular "Celebrity Fit Club," decided to do something about it. "I said, 'Listen, why not start a campaign in which there is an interventional proponent in which it would go to people and tell them (to) lose weight?'"

Upon registering, participants receive a weight loss account on the website www.50millionpounds.com that helps them record their weight-loss progress. Every hour, the website sweeps all of the accounts and keeps a running total of all pounds lost. The program is free; participants have unlimited access to nutrition tips as well as a free Challenge Kit, which includes a pedometer and Dr. Ian's motivational CD.

"I spent many years as a medical journalist talking about how obesity ravages our community, particularly the African-American community, and I spent a lot of time trying to edu-

cate people and raise awareness about the hazards of obesity," said Dr. Ian. "If you look at the stats of African Americans and the country as a whole, the country is the heaviest it's ever been. African Americans exist at the end of the spectrum. Almost 80 percent of our women are overweight, almost 70 percent of men, 25 percent of our little girls, (and) 18 percent of our little boys, so we're really in trouble."

Regarding his 97-pound weight loss, Challenge participant Hugh Fletcher said at the Harlem event that featured LaBelle's appropriate rendition of her hit, "New Attitude," "What is most remarkable is that people see the change in your behavior and then they become inspired by what you do."

Forging A New Legacy

As the face of one of the biggest health initiatives in history, Dr. Ian has undertaken an ambitious responsibility to help an entire race of people lose not just weight, but address the bigger challenge of overcoming deeply rooted cultural beliefs and painful social realities.

"My experience as a black woman and as a black kid was (that it was) harder to eat healthy because eating healthy meant spending more money, which we didn't have," said Challenge



Since April 2007, Dr. Ian Smith has been on a 14-city tour to promote the benefits of The 50 Million Pound Challenge. Photography by Jeff Soucek.

Celebrity Champion and singer Kelly Price at a Challenge tour stop in Houston. “Fortunately, we are in a time where a lot of us are doing a lot better, and if not the best that we can do, certainly better than the ones before us.”

Price, who also attended the New York milestone celebration, said she is very open with her fans who want to know about her own weight struggles. “We’re the ones that seem to be stricken with these obesity-related diseases more so than any other ethnic group. So, we have to start loving ourselves better. It seems like we have found a way as a people to pull ourselves up out of poverty to get out of the ghettos. This is the one thing that we really seem to be having a struggle with,” the singer added.



As a matter of fact, the adult obesity rate has generally been climbing since 1980 when it was 15 percent. The nation’s entire adult population has grown heavier, and the heaviest have become much heavier in the last 25 years. More than 72 million adults are counted as obese.

Studies show there is a direct link between obesity and quality of life, and in particular, the quality of healthcare in this country. Though obesity affects all Americans across the socio-economic board, low-income minority women are more likely to be overweight. Today, obesity-related disease costs Americans more than \$93 billion, and it’s slowly becoming not just a black problem, but an urgent worldwide epidemic. Keenly aware of these facts, the Connecticut-born Dr. Ian remains fully aware and realistic about what he’s asking black Americans to do.

“We (African Americans) have what I call ‘cultural entrenchments.’ The way we eat has been with us for generations, and it has been a trans-generational thing – eating high-fat, fattening food, low-calorie foods, and high-sweet foods with very little nutritional value. This is the center of our cuisine. Beyond that, we have all these misconceptions or (misbeliefs) that we are born to be larger. Not true. The idea that we think we are born to be big-boned. Not true. The idea that because somebody in our family has died from diabetes, high blood pressure or stroke, it ultimately is going to be our fate also. Not true. These are the types of cultural entrenchments that we as African Americans have that I’m trying to reverse through education and awareness,” explained Dr. Ian. “Whenever you’re asking people to make these types of changes, it’s not easy.”

Check Out UIM Online With... Dr. Ian Smith at www.urbaninfluencemagazine.com.

Since April 2007, he has been on a non-stop, 14-city tour starting in Washington, D.C., to enlist the help of community leaders and celebrities across the nation to join the cause and root on black America, often times using an individual's personal struggles with their own health as an anecdote to educate.

"My brother got diagnosed with Type II diabetes and that really affected me," shared "American Idol" Reuben Studdard at the Memphis tour stop. At his heaviest, Studdard said he weighed 455 pounds, but has since lost more than 70 pounds, which he attributed to drinking more water and making wiser food choices.

"There is nothing unique to celebrities and weight loss that the average person doesn't also feel. And that's what I love about this," said Dr. Ian, who has written five books, including the *New York Times* Bestseller "The Fat Smash Diet."

However difficult the task may be, Smith remains confident and hopes the Challenge will become a "legacy-building momentum" that will help African Americans instill more healthy traditions in future generations of their families. This year, the program will be completely revamped, starting with the website, and expanded to include tours reaching black churches and historically black colleges and universities, and an initiative to address the growing plight of childhood obesity.

"I know a lot of grassroots community activities that are going on and this is what my hope for the Challenge has always been: that people will take ownership of the Challenge and therefore duplicate it in their schools or their churches and their local communities," he said.

A Healthy Media Background

Given his professional past and present, Dr. Ian is well equipped to speak from a soap box to make his plea heard. He is the former medical correspondent for NBC News and he has extensively shared his expertise on various television broadcasts, including "The View," "The Tyra Banks Show," "Larry King Live" and "Anderson Cooper 360°." He has written for *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Men's Health* and the *New York Daily News*. His story and contributions have been featured in such magazines as *People*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *Cosmopolitan* and the University of Chicago's *Medicine on the Midway*. Currently, he hosts his own nationally syndicated radio show titled "HealthWatch" on American Urban Radio Networks.

Though not his intention, it was while reporting that he began to consider a career as a nutritionist. "When I started writing my column for *Time*, I noticed that so many people who



were e-mailing me were confused about health and nutrition," he said. From there he began to study nutrition more seriously, and apparently even with his already illustrious background, he is still learning as the latest phase of his career continues. "It (the Challenge) has impacted me tremendously," noted Dr. Ian, a graduate of the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine. "I learned that in order to talk to people you have to understand people."

Though he could give no clear estimate on when the Challenge's participants will reach the final 50 millionth pound in fear of "jinxing" himself and the entire initiative, Dr. Ian made it perfectly clear that failure is absolutely not an option.

"Of all the things I've done, this to me is the most critical thing I've ever done in my career, which is to try and get a whole group of people, millions of people, to take steps and make lifestyle changes that won't just last for the short term but last for the rest of their lives," he said. "I can't let my people down, and I don't want them to lose because if we don't get to the 50 million pounds, then we all lose – and I refuse to lose." **UIM**

Lenora E. Houseworth is a staff writer for Urban Influence Magazine.