TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

July 28, 2022

Summary: It’s easy to often find ourselves behind the wheel or behind a desk, causing us to fall behind on physical activity. And when our built environment lacks sidewalks, trails, bike lanes – in other words, walkability and active transportation – it becomes even harder to get up and be physically active. But efforts are underway within communities of all sizes to make them easier and safer for residents and visitors to walk, jog, run and bike – in both residential neighborhoods and business districts that profit from increased foot traffic. To help us see the big picture and hear specific examples, the TSET Better Health Podcast this month welcomes Ron Frantz and Shane Hampton of the University of Oklahoma’s Institute for Quality Communities, former Tonkawa Elementary School Principal Kelly Martin and TSET Healthy Living Program Coordinator Doug Walton.

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**[Theme music]**

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is James Tyree, a TSET health communication consultant. Now, my usual partner, the great Cate Howell, is off this month to enjoy a very well-deserved vacation. However, I am very happy to welcome our guest co-host, producer, birthday man and TSET’s newest health communication manager, Dylan Jasna. Welcome Dylan!

Dylan Jasna: Hey James and hello everyone, it’s great to be here with you and our listeners. At TSET, I manage the communication side of our Healthy Youth Initiative and Shape Your Future brands. This includes all the resources we provide to help every Oklahoman be tobacco free, eat better and be more active. And speaking of physical activity, that’s what we’re exploring more of, at the community level, in this episode.

J. Tyree: That’s right. The idea for this episode started with the Walkability and Placemaking Summit that took place in Ponca City in June of this year. It was organized by two TSET Healthy Living Program coordinators in Kay County, Jenny Creech and Sarah Davis, and their wonderful community partners. The summit was so terrific that I wanted us to share its information with all our listeners.

D. Jasna What made that event so great?

J. Tyree Well, the event featured speakers and panelists who offered great ways and reasons for making their cities, neighborhoods and schools more accessible for pedestrians, joggers and bicyclists. It was preceded the early evening before by a walking tour of downtown Newkirk, that featured a new app that can help pedestrians in a certain town hold up their phone or tablet to see what the various buildings looked like up to 100 or more years ago. You know, it’s amazing what can be seen and learned by getting out and walking in our Oklahoma communities!

D. Jasna: I’m excited to hear from our guests today, all of whom presented at the walkability summit in Ponca City. They included a Kay County elementary school principal, a TSET Healthy Living Program coordinator who works with many community partners in Muskogee for active transportation, and two experts on walkability and placemaking at the University of Oklahoma.

S. Hampton: **(00:42)** I’m Shane Hampton, I’m the director of the University of Oklahoma’s Institute for Quality Communities.

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D. Jasna: So, walkability I can figure out, but what exactly is placemaking?

S. Hampton **(1:14)** Yeah, many people in community development and related fields might be hearing the terms walkability and placemaking and kind of wondering what those are really all about or how to get started on making progress or why they should even care about those two terms. So for me, walkability is about making it safe and comfortable for people to walk in your neighborhood or town. And that might be in more of a residential setting, which is imagining being able to walk to amenities like parks or schools or other neighborhood destinations. And it could be walkability in a more commercial district setting, like Main Street. Being able to window shop, walk along a nice pleasant, shaded sidewalk and experience a city's character on foot. So walkability is all about that safety and comfort of being able to get out of the car and enjoy walking around the community.

D. Jasna: OK, and placemaking?

S. Hampton: **(2:20)** Placemaking is really kind of a process where local residents can help shape strategies or programs that improve their public spaces. So public spaces might be parks or plazas or streets or even public buildings like libraries or courthouses. And we really see a lot of towns want to make their public spaces more welcoming and interesting so that people can spend time there and meet neighbors and find reasons to come together in public spaces.

D. Jasna: It seems like sidewalks ***are*** the best way to encourage people to walk more, but they are not a given in every community.

S. Hampton: **(4:02)** Some streets really do require sidewalks so that we can be safe when we're walking and separated from any conflict with vehicles. But it is pretty common, especially in those post World War II neighborhoods to not have sidewalks constructed at the same time as the neighborhood. But, I think things are changing a little bit around Oklahoma and the rest of the country as well. So sidewalks, walking infrastructure are increasingly seen as essential components of infrastructure again for streets and roads. And that's really driven by people wanting to live in neighborhoods where they have options for daily errands or recreation to get out and walk. And a way we are seeing the prevalence of sidewalks increase, in some cities, they've changed ordinance so that new developments are required to include a sidewalk in their development plan. So that way in areas that are experiencing growth, those new areas are covered by sidewalks.

D. Jasna: It’s good to know we are seeing more sidewalks now, but how is this happening?

S. Hampton: **(around 5:20)** Cities have to turn to understanding how to prioritize replacing or constructing new sidewalks in those established areas. And cities are making progress in that too. So Oklahoma City has done a great job. They have a 600 square mile city that they have to prioritize where they spend infrastructure dollars. And there's a planning initiative called Bike Walk OKC that has done a great job prioritizing where do we start. If we can only build so many sidewalks each year, or with certain pools of funding, what's the most important type of sidewalk and location for sidewalks that we can select. So we've seen a lot of progress in those cities, and I think smaller cities are finding more and more funding sources from the state or groups like TSET as well, where they can also pursue walking improvements.

D. Jasna: This focus on walkability is not only making neighborhoods more appealing, Shane says it’s also good for business.

S. Hampton: **(6:51)** People want to have a walkable commercial district in their own community and they like to travel to visit successful places all over the state too. And a lot of communities want to see that their main street thrives. Main streets that are walkable and well cared for are a great environment for locally owned businesses in particular. So they're a place where people enjoy experiences that are created by those local entrepreneurs. And the best thing about it is we can't replace that experience of strolling Main Street or browsing local goods or having a great meal with your family with online shopping. We just can't replace that experience online. So I think having a walkable commercial district fitting into that experience people want can help make communities be really resilient and have economic success.

D. Jasna: OU’s Institute for Quality Communities, also known as IQC, has helped a number of communities become, not just healthier with active transportation, but also more vibrant. Shane explains how IQC does this.

S. Hampton: **(8:04)** Our Institute for Quality Communities is located in the College of Architecture at OU. So we are interested in everything to do with the built environment. So whether that's from the inside of the building to outside in the streets in between buildings or parks. We are interested in helping communities advance their goals related to those places and challenges. So couple of things that we do, one is the place making conference that should be returning in 2023 after we had a pause in that event during the pandemic. So we hope to bring groups back to Norman to hear from a couple of great speakers in the spring, and just kind of energize and inspire people to go back and keep working in their community on those topics. And we also provide direct assistance to communities as well. So each spring we have a request for proposals from towns and cities all over the state, people who represent municipal governments or local neighborhood non-profits can write in to describe something they're working on and see if we can find a way to help them out. We work with students in particular trying to put them to work on real world issues. And so we tend to act as a matchmaker between a community that needs some help design and planning assistance on a topic and students who want to learn by doing and experiencing.

D. Jasna: It sounds like a win-win situation all around, for the students and certainly for cities and towns of all sizes, partnering with IQC. So, how can someone learn more about this resource?

S. Hampton: **(9:59)** If anyone is a social media user, we are on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter under OUIQC or OU Institute for Quality Communities. So follow us on social media to find out what we're up to. And you can also check out our website, which is IQC.OU.edu. On our website we have information about upcoming ways to collaborate or upcoming events. And we also have a library of projects that we've helped communities within the past.

D. Jasna: IQC’s expertise is valuable, but so are financial resources to help make walkability and placemaking plans a reality.

S. Hampton: **(11:30)** There are a number of support mechanisms that community advocates can try to look into. So the Oklahoma Department of Transportation, ODOT can fund walkability improvements through their transportation alternatives program or Tap. They have some new funding opportunities coming up in the next month or so. Really soon. So watch for ODOT funding. Another great resource is Regional Councils of Government. So here in central Oklahoma, we have the Association of Central Oklahoma Governments or ACOG. Every region in Oklahoma is covered by one of these COGs. So you can check out those. They have a lot of transportation funding that they can filter down to local governments and entities. And of course, we always talk to communities about having access to their local TSET coordinator if they're lucky enough to have TSET program in their area. Other non-profits like AARP or The National Association of Realtors are also interested in placemaking and walkability. So really there's a lot of groups either from a government standpoint or from a non-profit and granting agency standpoint that are looking to support those initiatives.

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J. Tyree: That was great, Dylan. Our thanks to Shane Hampton for sharing those insights on walkability with us. Later in this episode, we will hear from Shane’s colleague at OU’s IQC, Ron Frantz, who will talk more about the benefits and – dare I say, excitement – of placemaking. But first we will hear from a pair of guests who are seeing the benefits of getting sidewalks, paths and trails in their own communities. The first is a long-time educator in Kay County that I met at the summit in Ponca City.

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Kelly Martin: **(00:27)** My name is Kelly Martin, and I've been in education for 31 years. I did 10 years at Newkirk where I taught a variety of subjects. I did some special ed. I did developmentally delayed, second grade, kindergarten, fourth and fifth grade reading. In a small school, when you have lots of different certifications, you do whatever they need. Then I moved to Tonkawa, which is my hometown, and I taught kindergarten. Then I became the principal and I've been the principal for eight years at Tonkawa Elementary. June 30th is my last day and I will be moving to Deer Creek Lamont Elementary School as the principal there.

J. Tyree: Kelly shared with us at the summit how she was able to work with TSET, its Healthy Living Program, and other partners to bring a walking path recently to Tonkawa Elementary School when she was still the principal there.

K. Martin: **(1:37)** Well, Jenny Creech, who is with TSET, reached out to me and said, "Hey, would you be interested in doing Certified Healthy?" It was maybe my first or second year at being principal and I said, "I don't know anything about it, but sure." Because she said, "You can get some free things and we'll give you some help." So that kind of began my journey with TSET. So Jenny and some of the other people she worked with were great help at first. We worked really hard on getting policies in place and getting them board approved, because a lot of times we thought we had a policy and this is how we did it, but we didn't actually have the policy. So that took us two or three years to get all of our policies in place and then I was able to apply for a district TSET grant and I received $20,000 to build a walking trail. … Because before, our kids could not get out. If it was wet, even just damp from the dew, we couldn't get out and walk.

J. Tyree: So to recap, she worked with Jenny Creech of the TSET Healthy Living Program on policies that not only improved wellness at her school, but also helped them receive a TSET Healthy Schools Incentive Grant – and other grants, including Oklahoma Tribal Engagement Partners, or OKTEP.

K. Martin: **(2:56)** Because of TSET, ... OKTEP reached out to me and we have a high native American population, so with OKTEP, that's one of the requirements. So they reached out to me and they were able to come in and they do a program called Eagle Adventure with our pre-K in our first grade and it just talks about being active and what foods are nutritional. Then they were able to help me get a storyline walking trail and it goes around our walking trail and it has pictures and a story, and it gives the kids different movements to do as they're walking. That will premiere in August because with COVID and stuff, things kind of got behind and it will use some of the Tonkawa native language in these storylines. So that happened and then a program called Project Switch 2.0 found me because of TSET and reached out to me and asked if I would like to be part of their grant program.

**(3:59)** We received $7,000 from them to purchase some things for the school and one of the best things for me was we got to be part of Painted Spaces, a partnership with UCO through the Project Switch grant. They came up and they actually painted things on our concrete spaces, on our walking trail, on our basketball court. They painted four square, they painted different zigzag courses, tic-tac-toe. They did a bullseye where you throw bean bags out on it and it was just things to make the kids more active when they were out there. Then I also received a TSET site grant for $4,000 to get hydration systems for outside, because that was one of our biggest problems is we could now get outside, but we didn't have water outside. So I was trying to haul coolers outside to do water and that got to be pretty labor intensive. So they will be getting hydration systems here in the next month.

J. Tyree: It was great to hear how this walking trail financed by a TSET grant opened the door to Tonkawa getting additional funding for even more resources that boosted the kids’ health and wellness. But I wanted to hear more about how the walking trail, the project that started it all, made an impact for the kids, their well-being and even their education.

K. Martin: **(6:28)** Well, for the students it's been great because before we have about 460 kids in the school and in the morning when they'd come in for breakfast, we had nowhere to put them besides the gym and they would just have to sit, some of them for 35, 40 minutes. We tried to go to our high school track, but you still had to go through wet grass and mud and dirt and all that was being tracked into the school. So they would just have to sit. Once we got the walking trail, we had concrete right out our back door so it didn't matter how wet it was. They could go out the back door and walk the walking trail. Then we've used it at recess. They walk the walking trail.

**(FF to about 9:30)** For the kids that have to walk at recess time, it's definitely helped them because they are getting fresh air and they are getting movement. Instead of before, they got in trouble in class for being rambunctious and then we said, "Okay, now you sit out at recess." So it's almost like we were part of the problem because we weren't giving them an outlet. So now they have an outlet where they can walk the walking trail, they'll be able to read the story trail. On the walking trail with the painted spaces, it says ... when they're going around, it'll show do a squat so they can do five squats and they can go to the next one and do jumping jacks. So it kind of gives those kids that need that extra movement, that before we were punishing them, it's giving them a chance to do that movement. Our PE uses it a lot just to start their time, to get their blood going with the walking trail and doing the Painted Places things going around. So it is definitely been a beneficial thing for our school.

J. Tyree: The trail clearly has been fantastic for Tonkawa Elementary School kids and teachers in a variety of ways, but they aren’t the only ones getting great use from it.

K. Martin: **(7:25)** The community can use it at any time. I see the community using it more in the fall because they have Peewee football out behind it. So you have all these little brothers and sisters and parents that are waiting on the older children to get finished with football. So they come over to the playground and walk the walking trail and play on the playground equipment. So it's there for the community to use.

J. Tyree: The principal spearheaded the effort to get a walking trail and other improvements, but Ms. Kelly Martin said none of it would have happened if others weren’t involved.

K. Martin: **(8:12)** Oh huge, because there's no way any of what we've accomplished at Tonkawa Elementary would've happened without partnerships with other people. TSET was kind of my driving force, but from there that helped us branch out into lots of different other partnerships. Some of the partnerships too were even community partnerships. Hembrian Hodgdon did our walking trail and he donated some labor and some time for me to be able to get it to the size we wanted. Even the city has came in and done some painting stuff for me for bike trails and stuff and it all started with TSET. So we've just gained lots of partnerships through just the knowledge of TSET and being certified healthy and pushing the walking and pushing the nutrition and just being a healthier community.

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D. Jasna: That was a terrific example of how a walking trail created a healthier environment on a school campus, and we thank Kelly Martin for sharing that with us. Now let’s hear how improving walkability can benefit an entire community from a TSET Healthy Living Program grantee…

Doug Walton: **(00:15)** Doug Walton, coordinator, the Muskogee County TSET Healthy Living Program.

D. Jasna: He’s here to tell us about Connect Muskogee.

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D. Walton: **(00:42)** It is a plan and a process for prioritizing the connections needed within the city to basically better tie together sidewalks and public transit and trails and bike ways. It actually lays out three specific sort of street corridor improvements, which include improvements for both pedestrians and bicyclists and transit users as well as three additional trail projects.

D. Jasna: Connect Muskogee started in early 2019, when a steering committee of various stakeholders, including TSET, formed to tackle the growing transportation needs of the city.

D. Walton: **(2:02)** And then really was just about to launch in terms of sort of the public input process, getting surveys and map tools sort of completed and gathering folks together right when COVID sort of kicked off March, 2020. So it went virtual and was able to really sort of morph into a different process that allowed people to still participate. So since then, the recommendations that came from the transportation planners and engineers we've had in our hands now about six, seven months and have had several proposals go forth to fund those. But it is we think still probably easily three to five years probably before all of these projects could receive funding and even begin construction.

D. Jasna: It will take quite a while for Connect Muskogee plans to fully be in place, but the collaborative way in which stakeholders are going about it is important for several reasons.

D. Walton: **(3:32)** I think one of the biggest is that it brought together just a lot of different entities, agencies, city and county departments and organizations that either have a role in the transportation infrastructure in terms of some level of implementation, whether it be the transit authority or the streets department at the city, or they have people who clearly are served by a good functioning, intact transportation network. So that was one of the, I think, most important pieces that the project really brought together. And I don't know, gaining community buy-in I think was just because there were kind of a critical mass of really collaborators, stakeholders who all saw at least one common goal in having something like this where we've elevated some priorities for improvements for our transportation system. And so that gave everyone sort of a reason to be involved.

D. Jasna: As a TSET Healthy Living Program coordinator, Doug says his key role in Connect Muskogee is facilitation.

D. Walton: **(around 5:40)** Kind of getting and keeping the partners together and ensuring clear communications on where the group was headed and what decisions had been made, what actions needed to be taken corresponding with the different sort of other lead agencies, city of Muskogee and Muskogee transit, OSU extension, neighbors building neighborhoods all in Muskogee to just kind of ensure we were all staying on the same page and getting done what different pieces we each needed to do.

D. Jasna: But… he also has a personal stake in the comprehensive project.

D. Walton: **(6:50)** I really like to ride my bicycle and to use the trails that we do have in Muskogee. And we have a trails master plan that was created back in 2004 that I didn't learn about until starting to work at the Muskogee County Health Department coordinating the TSET, then it was the Communities of Excellence in Nutrition and Fitness program, 11 years ago, 2011, did I learn about the master plan calling for 52 miles of trails and 15 miles of on street bikeways all within the city, not to mention a lot of those trails and bikeways extending out beyond the city to greater distances. And so having more of those in place to ride on and enjoy and invite others to do the same really, I think is one of the most exciting reasons or benefits that I can see for all of this happening.

D. Jasna: So Doug has his reasons for improving and expanding safe, active transportation, but he has learned over the years, many people and organizations have their own reasons to share in this common goal.

D. Walton: **(9:05)** Maybe just an organization that just serves a lot of people who may have transportation challenges, be it healthcare or mental health services or housing authorities or any number of programs, agencies that benefit from having effective and connected transportation options for the people they serve. Once those folks are together in the same room or space or whatever, just really kind of honing in on your particular area, what seemed to be the greatest needs and/or opportunities, common goals, things that everyone sort of would benefit from improving. That may be just through some couple meetings or maybe some kind of surveying or other assessing, but I think to me, finding the allies and a common goal or two really just about anywhere you are going to be good places to start.

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J. Tyree: It will be fun to see how Connect Muskogee unfolds in the coming years to everyone’s benefit there. We appreciate Doug Walton for sharing that information with us. And now let’s go back to Ron Frantz, a man of many hats at the University of Oklahoma who gives us a refreshing and relatable take on placemaking.

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Ron Frantz: **(around 00:15)** I have a couple positions here at the OU College of Architecture at Norman, with the Institute for Quality Communities. I'm the director of Small Town Studios. Also an associate professor with the architecture division, and I'm the coordinator for the environmental design undergraduate program.

 **(FF to 1:44)** So I always think a sense of place is sort of a passive noun, and you may never have a sense of place just because you're a newcomer to an area or you don't feel attachment to that neighborhood for some reason, or the city or something. And I think a placemaking as an active verb counterpart to the sense of place. So if I don't have a sense of place, I can go out and do place-making and I can go, "Okay, well by golly, this is where I live, or this is where I work, or I want to get to know my neighbors better, or this dead space can be activated, and it's an active thing that you do. So you do place-making so that then you have a feeling for a sense of place.

**(FF to 3:35)** I think by telling the stories, having people walk through their downtowns, learn the histories, walk through their neighborhoods, I think that's how you can sort of benefit a community's present and future because you start getting people to look, and listen, and observe their communities in a different way. And I can almost promise you, I've never had someone at the end of some walking tour, and I've led thousands of them in hundreds of communities. I've never had anyone at the end of that tour go, "Gosh, this was a waste of my time, and I don't know anything more about my community." It's always like, "I had no idea this was here," or, "I've never noticed that," or, "Boy, I'm going to walk this again, because it was so interesting." So I think there are just so many things to benefit from.

J. Tyree: Placemaking, he went on to explain, is great for our physical and mental health in addition to increasing our knowledge and sense of place.

R. Frantz: **(4:52)** I really think that if placemaking is happening, and places are interesting and they're attractive, and they're clean, and even I'm talking more about beautiful buildings, just not stark box buildings, but beautiful buildings, that encourages walkability. And they're just more and more studies all the time about how walking, just simple walking increases our health in so many ways. And it's not just weight loss. It helps with diabetes, it helps with heart, it even helps with mental health. Because we're giving ourselves a break from everything else, not just sitting in front of a computer or driving or something. And it gives us ourselves a break, so that we can have a little downtime and think.

 One of the things I do with my students in one of my classes is I assign them a silent walk. I tell them to go by themselves and to walk. Pick some historic neighborhoods, some historic downtown. It doesn't have to be here in Norman. It can be in Oklahoma City. If they go home for the weekend, it can be in Tulsa or Ponca City or someplace like that. And I tell them, "Do a silent walk. Put away the phone, get rid of the earbuds, don't go with anyone. Simply go do a silent walk and observe the communities." And to a student it's just like, "Oh man, I just needed this downtime."

J. Tyree: Sometimes a little walking around town can yield healthy habits that last a lifetime.

R. Frantz: **(6:28)** I'll throw out another one thing just for an example. So when my kids were in school, at Bishop John Carol School in Oklahoma City, they had an incredible PE teacher named Carol Heinan. And she had 100-mile club. And during the school year, you could run 100 miles or you could walk 100 miles. And that was what she used to encourage the students to be healthy and to get out and exercise. Family members and parents could join along. You could walk if you didn't want to run. Our sons really got into running, my wife and I walked. So every year for eight years we were in the 100 mile club. I would do three-mile urban hikes, downtown Oklahoma City with them on weekends to burn up energy with twin boys, and also to get my physical exercise. Those two guys are now 29 years old, and they still both run and they both still walk a lot. One of our sons is a marathon runner, and his goal is to run in the top six marathons in the world. He's already halfway there. And his ultimate goal is to qualify for the Olympics. It was that one little thing, a teacher having a 100-mile walking club that encouraged all of us to do that.

**(FF to 9:14)** And so my wife and I've been walking, our neighborhood, we've been doing downtown Oklahoma City, Will Rogers Park, the Myriad Gardens, Scissortail Park. We've been finding other public gardens in Oklahoma City and walking, and every time I do that I feel like my physical health is better, but especially my mental health. And I think that is so critical right now, following all the stress of this pandemic.

J. Tyree: We do have great places to walk in the OKC metro area, but what about smaller towns? Is placemaking and walkable spaces only the domain of larger cities?

R. Frantz: **(8:12)** No, I do not believe so. And with IQC, we've gone to some really small communities and walked the entire downtown, or from city limits to city limits on all four sides. Blair, Oklahoma is a small town, and we were able to do that. We've been to Wynnewood, we've been to Wewoka, we always do a lot of walking tours. Guymon, Oklahoma. I believe any place can benefit from place making. And can benefit from improved walkability. I think we're just, especially coming out of this two plus year pandemic thing when so many of us were isolated in our house, I think so many of us are needing to be out and about, and to see people and talk with people again. And I'm a very slow mover on this. I'm still wearing a mask, I'm still very being very careful. But I know my mental health is much better when we go out and walk.

**(FF to 10:22)** In my signature of emails, I have a quote that I just made up. I said, "A good day is spent strolling main street with student, staff and faculty." And that is my favorite thing, is to load up the vans and go out and see these communities and walk around. Especially downtowns, but sometimes we're working in neighborhoods as well. And so I love going to places and seeing things and showing students what our communities are like, introducing them to community leaders, bringing students and letting the community leaders meet these students. Sometimes they're from all over the world. And bringing people together and safely walking around through the downtown.

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J. Tyree: It was so nice chatting with Ron again after that impressive Walkability and Placemaking Summit in Ponca City. Our thanks go out again to Jenny Creech and Sarah Davis of the TSET Healthy Living Program of Kay County and their community partners for putting that together, and I’m glad our listeners heard some great insights and experiences from the summit’s key presenters. And you, Dylan, think often of the benefits of walking and physical activity through your work with Shape Your Future.

D. Jasna: I do! The main objectives of Shape Your Future are to encourage Oklahomans to eat better, move more, drink water and be tobacco free. If you go to Shape Your Future OK.com, we have a ton of free interactive resources for all Oklahomans! I’m talking free activities for families, free workouts, free meal plans, along with grocery lists. Go check it out and share it with all your friends and family!

 I had a great time on the podcast today, and I want to thank all of our guests and listeners for joining us.

J. Tyree: I agree, thank you Dylan and to all of you who are listening. Remember that you can always find our full podcast archive complete with transcripts at tset.ok.gov/podcast, and please follow TSET on social media @OklahomaTSET to stay up to date on all things wellness and health related.

D. Jasna: So until next time, this is Dylan Jasna …

J. Tyree: and James Tyree wishing you peace …

D. Jasna: And better health!

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