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## **Sweating To a Reggie Beat Fitness Guru Inspires Mass Movement**

By Pamela Gerhardt  
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Two years ago, life could have been better for Cheryl Jones. At age 47, the mother of two had been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, her marriage was faltering, and at 5-8 she weighed in at 220 pounds. Out of desperation, she forked over \$4 to the Rollingcrest Chillum Community Center in Prince George's County, parked her kids along the gym wall and began following the energetic moves of a funk aerobics class.

Then she started crying. And couldn't stop.

Class instructor Reggie Freeman was on her in a flash. He pushed the wireless mic away from his mouth and, beneath the beat, whispered, "Are you all right?" She nodded. Moments later, Freeman asked again. More nods. More tears. Finally, he asked her to meet him after class.

"She was very depressed and talked about how she had to take care of her kids and everyone else," recalls Freeman, who met with her for nearly two hours. "I see so many women putting others before themselves. But you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of others."

Over the years the aerobics instructor became her friend, diet coach and confidant. Now she's one more in the legion of Reggie faithful.

"Reggie helped me focus on me," says Jones, who today weighs 179 pounds and has her diabetes under control through exercise, diet and medication.

"Exercise is the best antidepressant. I live to come here [the Rollingcrest class]. This is my little block of time. On those few days when you just don't want to go, you think of Reggie and come anyway. And never regret it."

Three days a week, roughly 80 people make that same journey -- a turnout that turns heads in fitness circles. "If you get 40 people in a class you're doing very well," says Tom Ivicovic, spokesman for the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

What's more, about 20 regulars have been sweating with Freeman, a 39-year-old Federal Election Commission paralegal, since he started his gym gig 11 years

ago. "For a relationship to exceed one or two years is truly remarkable," says Chuck Krautblatt, CEO of the International Fitness Association in Orlando.

"Aerobics classes are usually a passive environment. You would have to be very innovative to consistently draw in that many people. This guy must be very good."

One more thing that's notable: Like himself, Freeman's students are overwhelmingly African American -- by design. His motive for becoming an exercise guru was to make a dent in his community's higher rates of obesity, diabetes and coronary heart disease. "In the past we haven't taken good care of ourselves," says Freeman. "I wanted to change that."

### Filling a Need

The basis for Freeman's concern is uncontested. Over the past few decades, rates of those three diseases have soared in the black community, outpacing rates for whites. Cardiovascular disease is now responsible for more deaths among African Americans than all other diseases combined. According to the Association of Black Cardiologists, 41 percent of black men have the disease, compared to 30 percent of white men. (For women, the comparable incidence ratio is 40 percent to 24. )

Nearly a fifth of African Americans have type 2 diabetes. According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), African Americans are almost twice as likely as whites to have the disease.

Obesity is a contributing factor in both diseases. According to the American Obesity Association, 63 percent of blacks are overweight -- 30 percent of them enough to be considered obese, compared to 53 and 21 percent of whites.

Last year the NIDDK released a study showing that people at high risk of diabetes could sharply reduce their chances of developing the disease through diet and exercise alone.

What he could offer to alleviate the problem, Freeman recognized some time ago, was exercise incentive. And information. "I wanted the opportunity to answer questions about diet and diabetes, how to stretch properly, and how the heart works." The challenge was getting both the exercise inspiration and the health information to his intended audience.

Back in 1991, when Freeman and a college friend decided to create a company offering aerobics classes, their prospects didn't look good.

"There were very few exercise outlets for the African American community at the time," says Freeman. "We would go to the aerobics association conferences and see very few African American instructors, and definitely no male African Americans. We looked at each other and said, 'Why are we not here?' "

How do you go about selling group exercise to a group that has largely steered clear of it? While data on the subject are scarce, health club memberships among blacks has tended to be low, according to Harvey Lauer, president of American Sports Data. "Historically, the health clubs and exercise classes just haven't drawn them in," says Lauer. Economics is presumed to be part of the reason but Freeman saw another problem.

"Back when we began, the style and the moves didn't have enough oomph, for lack of a better term," says Freeman. "The moves tended to be cute and very complex. We wanted something more upbeat and funky and street-simple that would be inclusive to a wider cross section of people." Not that fun was enough; Freeman wanted the class to convey a concern not just for the body, but for the whole person.

Freeman and his partner hired teenagers to tuck flyers under windshield wipers throughout the county, performed demos at Prince George's Plaza mall, advertised on black radio stations. Soon Torobics, as they called their group, was holding classes in six locations. Since then, Freeman's partner has retired from aerobics, and today Freeman teaches only at Rollingcrest.

### Reggie Zone

Part counselor, drill sergeant, clown, preacher and funk-a-delic instructor, Freeman gives his classes everything he's got.

It's clear from the start that Jane Fonda this isn't. House, tribal and urban mixes boom from giant speakers through the gym as Freeman weaves his way through the sweating crowd, heckling and getting in students' faces, crossing his arms in mock impatience and leading a call and response through his wireless headset.

Freeman: "How you feelin'?"

Class: "Very good!"

Freeman, louder: "How you feelin'?"

Class: "Very good!"

Freeman: "Work me, Reggie, drive me crazy!"

Class: "Work me, Reggie, drive me crazy!"

Freeman, his voice escalating: "I wanna work some more!"

Class: "I wanna work some more!"

Beat beat. "Oh, my goodness," says Freeman, all the while grinding with the class, sweat rolling off his shaved head onto the gym floor. "Oh, my goodness. I think I hear a beat. Hang in there." Beat. "Hang in there." Beat. "Hang in there." Beat.

Before you know it, you're soaring into the Reggie Zone, purging your workday, forgetting your precise location in the cosmos, pumping blood from your scalp to your toes. And laughing at the same time.

The steps are repetitive, to allow for students' varying skill levels, but the intensity slowly builds. Halfway through, Freeman goads the class. "Here's what I see," he says, making lackadaisical motions while holding a bored, tea-party expression. People laugh. The music kicks up a notch. Freeman yells, "I wanna see some attitude!!"

All he has to do is ask.

Says Sherri Clark, 41, of Northeast Washington, "Reggie is an enormous motivating force. Just when you think you've done your last lift or move and you can't do any more, he makes a joke and somehow pushes you. . . . When you're done you're sweaty and you can't believe you went that far."

Agrees Terri Dickerson of Northwest, who drives through rush hour traffic to attend the class despite her membership at the Silver Spring YMCA near her home: "He gives so much of himself . . . making you laugh, that you forget you're working out. He's not just counting down."

Chance Occurrence

If Freeman appears unusually devoted, it's because he's fought his own battles with weight gain, lethargy and depression. His interest in aerobics was sparked by accident. Literally.

In 1989 the steering wheel of his car locked up on the New Jersey Turnpike, and he rammmed into the median. The accident left him out of commission for months with an arm broken in two places and a broken leg. "I watched TV, ate and got depressed," says Freeman.

He ballooned from 170 pounds to 240. "I had gotten so big that when it came time to go to a job interview..., my mom had to rip out the back of my dress shirt. All day, I couldn't take off my jacket. That was the last straw."

He tentatively joined an aerobics class. Hated it, he claims, but he persisted. Then one day the instructor asked him to come forward and teach. "She must have seen something I didn't see," he says. "In front of the class something just clicked."

At least 80 people are happy he found his calling. "What motivates me is seeing so many people working out and doing well," says Freeman. "It's like a family, that's all I can say. Believe me, after working all day all I want to do is go home and go to bed, but as soon as I see the people standing there in the gym, I feel the energy coming back. Every time, it amazes me. I don't take any of it for granted."

Family is the word his students use, too, to describe the class -- and their motivation for returning. In Freeman's world, you don't carve a tiny niche in your week for exercise. Rather, you fuse it with other aspects of your life into an all-encompassing lifestyle change, a kind of fitness stew, frequently stirred by Freeman. Over the years, he's organized an aerobics cruise to the Bahamas and a night at the Studio Theatre, and pulled together a health fair in College Park that included seminars on how to read nutrition labels and other health-related topics. He staged a 10-year anniversary party, "2001: A Step Odyssey," and last Halloween showed up in a George Clinton-esque orange wig. This year he invited the entire class to a party at his house.

#### Bottom Line

The results? Karen Moore, 53, from Lewisdale, has been with Reggie for three years. Before that, she had high blood pressure, high blood sugar levels, weighed 50 pounds too much and suffered respiratory problems. "I was heading into diabetes," she says, and was taking medicine for high blood pressure. Her doctor suggested exercise. She tried dance classes. She tried Tae Bo (kick boxing). None of it stuck. Until Freeman. She went from a size 16 to 12, and today she's not taking any medication.

Clark, a member of Freeman's class for three years, credits his workouts -- along with her five-day-a-week runs of three to five miles each -- with helping her lose 30 pounds over the last year. "I'll probably never be a thin woman," she concedes, "but my blood pressure and heart rate and cholesterol are excellent."

She also appreciates the class's cultural flavor. "I don't attend the class specifically because it's predominantly African American, but the class does have a certain funkiness, a soul groove, that helps you stay with it. The Afrocentric beat of the music he plays is something we can relate to."

And it's something that, along with Freeman, keeps them coming back for more.

Says Carolyn Philson, 44, from Chillum, "Experts always say you should change instructors [to challenge yourself and avoid getting into a rut], but in this class it's always something new, always a higher cardiovascular level." Her husband, who hip-hops through Freeman's workout for maximum intensity, was dubious when Carolyn first asked him to try Freeman's class. "I said, 'That's for girls,'" says Reggie Philson. The couple has been with Freeman for 11 years.

For his part, Freeman says his goal is simple. "My main objective is for people to enjoy themselves and sweat and not have to think so much." That equation of sweat and enjoyment -- once an oxymoron for many of his students -- now is hardly questioned.

April Biggs, 42, of Northwest Washington, been attending Freeman's class off and on for five years. Lately, it's been off, and she's feeling that it shows. She's put on some weight and is going back to Freeman's class, confident that there "I'll take off the weight."

Says Biggs, "He may model the class to attract African Americans, and it may be predominantly African Americans, but that's not why I go. There are old people and young people and Hispanics and a few whites in the class. I see it as a combination of people who have one thing in common: They like to move."•

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