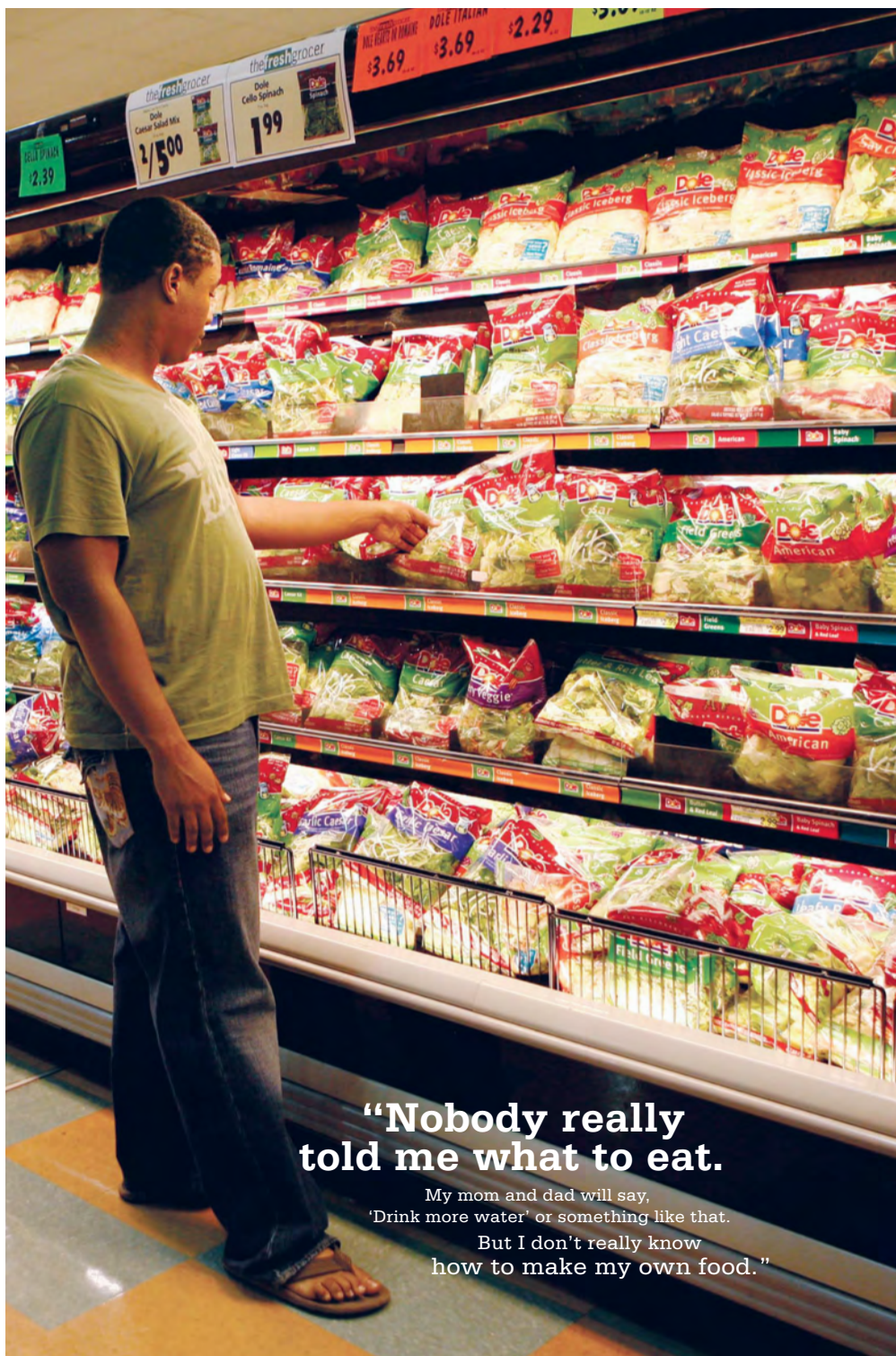


**“I told myself  
I was gonna  
stop being  
unhealthy.”**

**—Kenyon McGriff  
Philadelphia, Pa.**



ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION  
**Commission to Build a Healthier America**



**“Nobody really  
told me what to eat.**

My mom and dad will say,  
'Drink more water' or something like that.

But I don't really know  
how to make my own food.”



Five dollars.  
Just \$5 left until payday  
and a growling stomach.  
Kenyon McGriff  
faces a familiar dilemma:  
What to eat?

The decision was once easy;  
swing by the corner store and  
load up on chips and soda.

But on a visit to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia a few years ago, McGriff got a terrifying lecture.

"You are overweight," the doctor said. "You have diabetes and heart trouble in your family. Your neck is dark; that is a sign you are at risk for diabetes."

He was 15-years-old, black and weighed almost 270 pounds. His mother, aunt and grandmother all suffered from diabetes; one grandfather died of heart disease.

Other doctors had mentioned he was "a little bit unhealthy," but this one didn't "sugar coat it," McGriff recalls. If he didn't start exercising and overhaul his diet, she warned, McGriff could expect a lifetime of back pain, insulin shots and heart attacks.

"That was a wake-up call  
for me," he says.

Kenyon McGriff chose health. He joined a running club and gave up sugary drinks and greasy fried foods. But like many Americans, he soon discovered the path to good health was an obstacle course in which money, education and one's environment can prove to be especially challenging.

"Nobody really told me what to eat," says the affable McGriff, who is now 17-years-old. "My mom and dad will say, 'Drink more water.' But I don't really know how to make my own food."

Even with pointers from his track coach and a high-school nutritionist, it hasn't been easy.

"There's a lot we're missing in this neighborhood," says McGriff one August day as he leaves his brick row house in search of a snack. "I can't find what I need for my diet."

The streets of McGriff's urban West Philadelphia neighborhood are dotted with fast food restaurants, Chinese takeout joints and corner stores selling packaged foods, cheap liquor and cigarettes.

McGriff bypasses Yock's, a popular greasy spoon, and heads to the Green Grocer market. It's a welcome addition to the neighborhood, though out of the price range of many.

As he strides into the store, his eyes register fresh fruit but his nose announces something else. It is the aroma of the comfort foods of his childhood: fried chicken, hot buffalo wings, chicken and gravy, and grits.

## **Kenyon McGriff chose health. He joined a running gave up sugary drinks and**

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Coach Scott Baier gathers McGriff's running group on the steps of Sayre High School.

## club and greasy fried foods.

**he soon discovered the path to good health course in which money, education and one's environment**

"It is tempting," he says, gazing at the steam trays. "I don't get paid until tomorrow, so I'm clinging to this five dollars."

As he trawls the aisles, McGriff proudly reads nutrition labels, rattling off phrases like "saturated fats." He reaches for a box of Caribou Coffee snack bars.

"Only 140 calories and they use real Caribou coffee," McGriff says. "I used to go for the Little Debbie's and Twinkies cakes." Granola bars are a decent option, he argues, since grains are good for you.



**“When I started running,  
I lost some friends,  
some of the people I hang out with.  
I tried to get  
but**



“My last five dollars,” he says again. “Should I get the strawberry yogurt bars or sushi?”

The yogurt bars would last longer, but McGriff opts to walk a couple blocks to a Japanese restaurant. At Mizu he orders California rolls and a glass of water totaling \$4.99. A penny to spare. While others might complain about the expense and sacrifice of being on a diet, McGriff enjoys discovering healthier new cuisines such as sushi and Thai.

McGriff is not poor. Both parents have steady jobs with good health insurance, and in September he enrolled at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. But work demands and his parents’ recent separation have made it difficult for either parent to prepare nutritious meals at home.

His mother, Keasha McGriff, a lifelong smoker who gave birth to Kenyon at age 17, is an emergency dispatcher for the city, a high-pressure job with odd hours. The stress and extra shifts to earn money for Kenyon’s college bills can wreak havoc with her diabetes.

“If my sugar level is up, I get home and just fall asleep,” she explains. “If I work the night shift, the kids order out Chinese or burgers from the corner store.”

When McGriff gets together with his father, a realtor, they usually eat soul food or fish and chips. “One of my favorite things to do with him is go out to eat,” says McGriff, who describes his dad as a “great role model.”

The McGriffs are hardly unique.

**them involved,  
some of them are just too cool for it.”**

—Kenyon McGriff

Left: Kenyon and his Students Run Philly Style teammates ride to an early morning workout at a nearby park. Kenyon's commitment to be part of the team has helped him in his quest to lose weight and be healthier.

Right: Kenyon spent the summer working at the Papa John's pizza parlor in West Philadelphia.



**When Baier calls for a standard stretch that involves lifting and holding one foot tucked up against the back, McGriff grabs the shoulder of another boy to “The first two weeks were “He’d run maybe a half-mile or a mile.”**

“The parents aren’t educated about health issues,” says school administrator Lynette Johnson. “They are dealing with their own issues of diabetes, hypertension, etc. and it becomes a cycle.”

Johnson invited a nutritionist to Sayre High School and the cafeteria added a salad bar. But after just three weeks, it was shut down.

“Our school cafeteria is nasty,” McGriff says. “We have burnt pizza every day; hoagies, which are lunch meat slapped on a soggy roll, and then a hot food like chicken nuggets or meat subs.” McGriff has high praise for the cafeteria’s soul food offerings—buttered rolls, roast chicken with gravy and mashed potatoes—but he knows that tasty doesn’t always equate with healthy.

During his senior year, McGriff took a job at the Papa John’s pizza parlor on 40th Street, which he says afforded him some healthier options.

“I can create my own subs, say with less cheese or all vegetables,” he says. Other days he’ll eat a pizza, the bread sticks or go to the nearby McDonald’s, where three cookies cost just one dollar.

“You gotta have income to have good health,” says McGriff, who considers himself better off than many.





**steady himself.**

**difficult” for McGriff, Scott Baier recalls.**

Still, he is keenly aware that if he had grown up somewhere else—perhaps in the leafy suburb where his father and sister live—he would have had a better quality of life.

“Where my dad lives, it is very high-priced; a lot of rich folks who can afford big homes,” he says. “In a high-priced neighborhood, you can get a decent meal every day.”

Even with his limited options, McGriff has made amazing progress altering his diet. But eating right wasn’t enough. He also had to get his body moving.

On a bright August afternoon, McGriff stood among a group of teenagers milling outside Sayre. They were sluggish and distracted. But coach Scott Baier, a wiry ball of energy in silky running shorts, wasn’t.

“Okay, we’re gonna do three and a half or four today,” Baier announces. “What do you think, maybe 10-minute miles or less?”

“Twenty minutes,” one student jokes.

“We could do that walkin’ on our hands,” says Baier, who coordinates the Students Run Philly Style program at Sayre. “Let’s get warmed up and then go hit the course.”





Slowly, cell phones snap shut and the teens shuffle over to the sidewalk. In the circle of taut, young bodies, one bulky form stands out. Even after losing 30 pounds, McGriff is still flabby.

Others bend effortlessly at the waist, touching their palms to the ground. But McGriff, in baggy sweat pants, strains to reach the tops of his ankles. When Baier calls for a standard stretch that involves lifting and holding one foot tucked up against the back, McGriff grabs the shoulder of another boy to steady himself.

“The first two weeks were difficult” for McGriff, Baier recalls. “He’d run maybe a half-mile or a mile.”

McGriff was initially discouraged for other reasons.

“When I started running, I lost some friends, some of the people I hang out with,” he says. “I tried to get them involved, but some of them are just too cool for it.”

On weekends, the squad travels to various parks to run along tree-lined paths. But on weekdays, the city’s traffic-clogged streets are their course.

Most of the youngsters sprint down busy Walnut Street, but McGriff takes his time. He lopes along, passing the high school and then his younger brother, who is doing what McGriff used to do every afternoon: standing on the corner with his friends munching potato chips.

McGriff turns left onto Cobbs Creek Parkway, passing a dimly lit bar, on his way to the corner of Pine, a busy intersection where he turns around. Baier and most of the others are so far ahead that they passed McGriff several blocks ago.

But McGriff hardly notices. When he runs, “I am thinking about the next goal, the next corner, the next turn,” he says.

And McGriff, now one of the veterans on the squad, has a certain confidence that comes from having already completed one marathon.

“I wasn’t the fastest runner or the slowest,” he says. “I had my own pace.”

When he finished that first time, McGriff’s mother broke into tears. Yes, she was as proud as any parent. But for Keasha McGriff, her son’s achievement meant so much more. Not long ago, she failed the police academy test because she could not finish a 1.5-mile run.

“I didn’t make my run,” she says. “But he finished, he finished his.”



# Influences on Health: Broadening the Focus

Health is shaped by many influences, including age, sex, genetic make-up, medical care, individual behaviors and other factors not shown in this diagram. Behaviors, as well as receipt of medical care, are shaped by living and working conditions, which in turn are shaped by economic and social opportunities and resources.

