"It's wonderful to get outside, get to work, and see such an incredible project yield so much goodness for so many people," says Obama

SHAPE'S 2009

women who shape the world

These 10 women—including politicians, researchers, CEOs, concerned moms, and more—have proven that one person's actions *can* make a difference in the lives of millions. Read their stories, see the changes they've jump-started, and be inspired to make an impact of your own.

BY ALICE OGLETHORPE

PROMOTING THE IDEA OF HOMEGROWN PRODUCE

Michelle Obama

When Michelle Obama, 45, moved into the White House in January, the nation waited to see how she'd put her stamp on the residence. They got their answer when—in between speaking out for women's rights, working moms, and military families—she started a vegetable garden on the South Lawn. "Throughout the campaign, we did what a lot of busy families do: We were so crunched for time, we wound up dining out or ordering in pizza for dinner. It was a real struggle to eat balanced meals," says the First Lady. "Everyone in the family started to see some weight creep on, so we looked at how we could change our diet for the better."

On the advice of her daughters' pediatrician, Obama tried to eliminate processed foods and sugary drinks and worked more fruits and veggies into their family meals. "It wasn't long before we noticed improvements in our energy and our bodies," she says. **"It showed me that eating healthy can start with something as simple as adding a new food to your diet—and I wanted to share that knowledge with as many people as possible."**

And so the garden was born. The produce, which is grown using organic fertilizer and organic weed killers, has helped all the Obamas embrace healthy eating. "Sasha likes peas a lot, Malia is a big broccoli fan, and Barack and I will eat pretty much anything," says Obama. "We have a ton of help with the garden. In addition to the White House chefs and the National Park Service staff who care for the South Lawn, so many people throughout the White House complex have asked if they can volunteer—who knew we had all these green thumbs on staff?" Students from a local elementary school also lend a hand to keep the garden growing. "It's been so rewarding to hear how important working on it has become to these kids," she says.

Obama hopes that by urging Americans to incorporate more fresh produce into their diets, a much larger health change will occur. "For the first time in the history of our nation, medical experts have warned that our youngest generation may have a shorter life span than their parents—that's unacceptable. Nearly a third of the children in this country are either overweight or obese, *continued*→

JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS/CORBIS

and more than a third will suffer from diabetes at some point in their lifetime. And in Hispanic and African-American communities, those numbers climb even higher," she says. "These are manageable and preventable diseases—we need to do all that we can to educate our children and help them lead healthier lives."

Because she knows it's not realistic for everyone to grow their own produce, **Obama also wants to see more support for farmers' markets and community gardens. "They're a great source for seasonal fruits and vegetables, and they can help kids get excited about eating well,"** she says. "That way, it becomes a natural part of their lives—and in time, we will begin to see obesity and diabetes rates decline. That will ultimately benefit millions and millions of people. The garden is just a first step."

Eating a nutritious diet is only part of the way Obama keeps herself healthy. "After I had Malia, I began to prioritize exercise because I realized my happiness is tied to how I feel about myself," she says. "I exercise four or five days a week (and Barack does six). I use the treadmill, lift weights, jump rope, kickbox, and do Pilates. Even though Barack and I are competitive—you should see us during a healthy game of Scrabble!—when it comes to working out, we leave the competition out of it and just encourage each other. It's very important to each of us that we take care of ourselves."

"You have control over your own actions, your own well-being."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW **Own your choices.** "There are so many people who will have opinions or disagree with the decisions you make that you might as well just start making them based on what *you* want. Your happiness isn't connected to your husband's or your boss's or your children's behavior entirely. You have control over your own actions, your own well-being. And if you spend the energy on that, you get unstuck," says Obama. **"If you are comfortable with what you choose, then everyone else's opinions are just conversation. If your decisions resonate with you from the beginning, the results will be much easier to live with."**

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET **Put yourself first.** "All too often, and understandably so, women's days are made up of so many tasks for family and work but not for themselves. We need to put ourselves back on the list! Ask yourself, 'Where am I in all of this?' Whether it's getting a long-overdue mammogram or going to the gym, we have to make ourselves a priority again," she says. **"I've often said that a community and a family are only as strong as the health of their women—not just physical health, but mental health too.** For me, working out is where physical and mental health intersect. I want my two girls to see that their mother takes care of herself, even if it means I have to wake up at 4:30 a.m. so I can fit in exercise."

Cox just celebrated her one-year anniversary of being healthy without relapsing

Helping girls with eating disorders heal

MELISSA COX

During the years she struggled with anorexia, Cox felt incredibly alone. "It seemed like nobody knew what I was going through," she says. "When I got better, I wanted to make sure other girls didn't feel so isolated."

Unsure what would be the best way to help others who suffer from anorexia or bulimia, Cox, now a 23-year-old college student, thought back to when she was sick. "I'd visit different Web sites that gave tips on how to hide your eating disorder and avoid food," she says. **"Why not make a site for learning how to live *with* food?"**

So she put together *freewebs.com/anadeath*, which offers a sense of community and advice to young women who are struggling with eating healthfully. Each month the site gets 3,000 visitors, many of whom e-mail Cox. "I write back to everyone," she says. "I believe I went through everything I did so I could improve others' lives."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW Don't suffer silently. "Reach out and get help—whether it's from friends, family, or a therapist. Any problem seems more manageable when you know you have support."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET Work out for your health. "I used to exercise to lose weight, but now I do it to build muscle and boost my self-esteem," she says.

DANA KEISLER

O'Brien sees paying for organic food as an investment in her family's future health

MAKING US "PICKY" EATERS

Robyn O'Brien

As a mother of four who regularly prepared packaged and processed meals, O'Brien never thought she'd become an advocate for going fresh. "I was your typical mom who was always running short on time and was stressed about money," she says. But that changed three years ago, when her daughter had a violent allergic reaction to something she ate. O'Brien, 38, started researching common ingredients—and what she discovered alarmed her.

It turns out the United States has one of the highest rates of food allergies among kids in the world. **"My hope is that every mother in America can become better informed so we can avoid potentially unhealthy ingredients,"** she says. "The key to doing this is to start reading labels. If you're confused, ask yourself: Does this food include only things my grandmother would have in a jar in her kitchen? If the answer is yes, buy it. This is something anyone can do—you don't need to live in a big city or spend a fortune."

Once O'Brien's research got her to the point where she felt educated enough to make better food choices for her family, she wanted to spread the word. The result was a Web site, *allergykids.com*, which she started on Mother's Day 2006, and a book, *The Unhealthy Truth*, which is out now in hardcover from Broadway Books. "The ideas—feed your family foods with ingredients you can pronounce, eat more fresh fruits and vegetables, go organic when possible, avoid overly processed foods—form a concept whose time has come," she says.

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW Don't aim for perfection. "You can drive yourself crazy, so I have an 80/20 rule for healthy eating," she says. "Do a good job 80 percent of the time and don't worry about the rest."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET Work out when you're feeling anxious. "Researching this book was a very stressful process," O'Brien says. "I had a clearer head on days when I went on my morning run. And I like that running doesn't cost much: All you need are sneakers and an alarm clock."

Durkin and a softball team from Harlem, New York

GETTING INNER-CITY GIRLS MOVING

Karen Durkin

As someone with an athletic background, Durkin, the new CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), knows the effect being part of a team can have on a young girl's life. "I played softball, basketball, and volleyball in high school and swam and played basketball in college," she says. "I believe I've achieved far more in my life because of sports, and now I'm working on leaving the ladder down for future generations to climb up as well."

The ones who need that helping hand the most? Girls who live in inner cities. "Only 26 percent of girls growing up in urban environments participate in organized athletics, compared with 54 percent of those in the suburbs," says Durkin, 44. **"In low-income neighborhoods, access to sports is not a given—and it's the girls who are suffering."** Not only does inactivity up their risk for obesity, but a recent study by the WSF found that girls who don't play on teams also have lower self-esteem and are less content with their lives than girls who do. "The more active a girl is, the more confident she will be," says Durkin. "It can really impact them for the rest of their lives."

This is why Durkin is expanding the WSF's GoGirlGo! program, which works to get underserved girls on the field, in the pool, or on the court. Already in Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and San Antonio, the program is launching in more cities this year, including New York, Seattle, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "We put together free events and work with organizations that target girls who are at an economic disadvantage," says Durkin. "A lot of schools no longer offer daily physical education classes, so a lot of kids go home and play video games or just hang out with friends. We want to show them that they can have fun while being active."

"The more active a girl is, the more confident she will be."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW **Try playing a team sport, even if you just join a recreational kickball team with your friends.** "In life and your job, you can't be successful on your own," she says. "Playing sports teaches you how to work well with different personalities, when to be a supporting player, and when to be the star."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET **Fuel your body right.** "When I was younger, I exercised to offset my bad eating habits—I ate way too many burgers and fries. But as I got older, I realized my workouts would go better if I had a healthier diet—plus, I would have more energy in other areas of my life. Now I eat five smaller meals made up of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. I still splurge when I'm out at restaurants or cooking for guests—and never feel guilty about it—but those are the exceptions now as opposed to the rule."

CHRIS FANNING, HAIR AND MAKEUP: SPRING SUPER/ENNIS INC.
OPPOSITE: BARBARA PEACOCK, HAIR AND MAKEUP: TIA MARIA

Expanding the reach of yoga

SUZANNE JONES

Despite its popularity, yoga still has a reputation for being a luxury exercise—one that only certain people can afford or have the time to do. Jones wants everyone to realize it *is* a necessity, especially for people going through tough times. "Four years ago, yoga helped me through a bout of severe depression," she says. "I didn't know who I was or what my purpose was in the world. My yoga practice was the only thing that got me out of bed. **The words the teacher would say were so inspirational; I'd leave class feeling like everything was going to be okay."** Once she recovered, Jones, 44, became a yoga instructor and made it her mission to teach others about the healing benefits of yoga and how to use it to ease life's difficulties.

After doing some research, Jones started YogaHope, a Boston-based organization dedicated to teaching yoga to women recovering from alcohol or drug addiction. "They walk into the room and think it's going to just be stretching," she says. "But they leave realizing it's more about reconnecting with their bodies and their emotions." The women spend an hour doing traditional poses while the instructor (either Jones or another volunteer) asks them to think about past decisions, the quality of their relationships, and other soul-searching topics. "It's very cathartic," says Jones. "These women feel so proud of what they've accomplished, which empowers them to make other changes to their lives."

The program has helped thousands of women over the past three years, but Jones wants to do even more. This year she teamed up with a researcher from Harvard Medical School to complete a study proving the power of yoga, and she launched the Yoga and Addiction Recovery Initiative. The goal: to add a 15-week yoga course to the typical 12-step drug and alcohol abuse rehab programs nationwide. "Yoga reduces stress, but taking one class can only do so much," she says. "By incorporating a series of sessions into people's treatment, we can teach them how to cope with anxiety without liquor or pills."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW **Yoga can help you eat healthier.** "I'd tried every diet and never felt happy with my body," she says. "But doing yoga made me feel so good on the inside, I naturally made better eating choices, like having more fruits and vegetables because they didn't weigh me down."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET **Don't underestimate the power of your breath to calm you.** "Concentrating on breathing in and out can slow you down and keep you sane," she says. Try this focused breathing technique: Inhale as deeply and slowly as possible, then exhale quickly and loudly. When all the air is out of your lungs, pause for a second, be still, then repeat.

"We don't just teach yoga, we teach personal power," says Jones, front center

Improving the health of African-Americans

LUCILE ADAMS-CAMPBELL, PH.D.

As the associate director of minority health and health disparities research at the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Adams-Campbell, 55, investigates why African-American women are more likely than Caucasians to die from breast cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes—and what can be done to improve their odds.

"Historically, very little research in the U.S. has focused on minorities," says Adams-Campbell. She has already led several large studies of African-American women, including one that examined the link between physical activity, nutrition, and disease for more than 59,000 participants. But these days, she's focusing on getting out into the community and educating people in the poorest neighborhoods in D.C. Her team hosts public meetings, where they explain topics like new health care laws, how to take part in clinical trials, and how to deal with being uninsured.

One of Adams-Campbell's biggest passions is lowering the rate of obesity among African-Americans. **"It sounds simple, but just informing these women that exercising more and cutting back on saturated fat will help them lose weight and live longer ups the odds they will actually do those things,"** she says. For Adams-Campbell, who has family members who have struggled with hypertension, diabetes, stroke, and cancer, this is so much more than a job. "When I see women improve their lives because of something I told them, I feel like I'm doing what I'm meant to do."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW **Educate yourself about any health issues.** "Read up on your symptoms, get a second opinion, and learn what options are available," she says. "The more you know, the better able you're going to be to make the right choice for you."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET **Don't treat all food equally.** "With nutrition, I use the analogy of a traffic light," she says. "Fruits and vegetables always get the green light, but treats, like ice cream, get a short yellow light followed by red. It means I can have a taste, but then I have to stop."

Adams-Campbell is looking into starting community walking groups in D.C.

Herseth Sandlin is bringing a fresh perspective to Congress

PROTECTING THE WOMEN WHO PROTECT OUR COUNTRY

Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

When soldiers return from fighting in the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Department of Veterans Affairs helps ease their transition back to civilian life. But women vets, who number upward of 1.8 million, face unique challenges—ones that aren't necessarily being met by the current system. "The VA was initially set up to handle mostly men because that's who the military used to be made up of," says Herseth Sandlin, 38, a congresswoman from South Dakota. "But ever since September 11, the demographics of veterans have been changing—it's time the VA changed as well." Which is why Herseth Sandlin introduced the Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act this year.

The bill, which has already been approved by the House of Representatives (similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate), would make sure women vets get the care they need—for both their physical and mental health—when they return home. "Nineteen percent of women soldiers come back from the Middle East with post-traumatic stress disorder, but at the moment, there are no experts in VA medical institutions they can turn to who specialize in women's psychiatric issues," says Herseth Sandlin. And while 86 percent of women vets who have served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are under the age of 40, if they choose to have children, their newborns' medical expenses are not covered. **"These women are risking their lives for our country," says Herseth Sandlin. "The absolute least we can do is make sure they are getting proper medical care."**

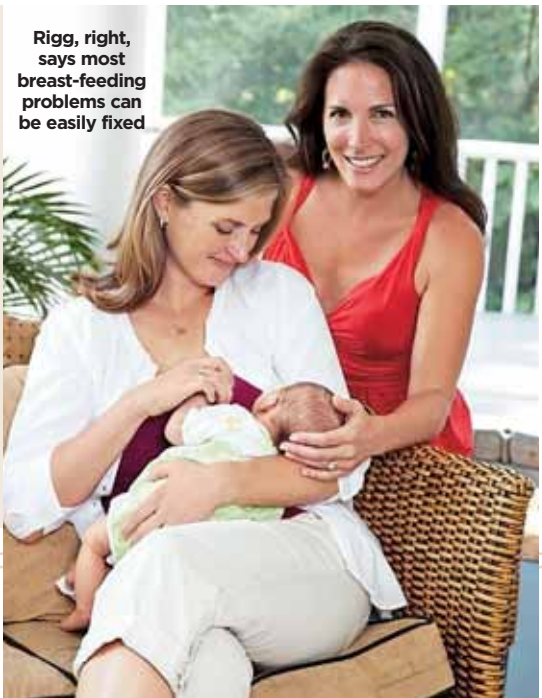
WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW **Don't be silent if there's an issue that concerns you.** "Whether you choose to call or e-mail your representative, write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, or even speak up on political blogs, your voice can have a huge impact," she says. "And while this is definitely important if you're aware of an injustice, it's also a good thing to do if you notice something positive you'd like to see more of."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET **Keep water nearby at all times.** "I have a really hectic schedule and have found that if I stay hydrated, I'm more energized, I don't get sick as often, and my skin looks better," she says. "Plus, I don't snack as much during meetings because I have something to sip on instead of reaching for the candy dish in the conference rooms."

Making it easier for new moms to breast-feed

DANIELLE RIGG

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 14 percent of babies are exclusively breast-fed until they're six months old, the minimum recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. But if Rigg, 41, and co-founder Bettina Forbes, get their way, their organization, Best for Babes, is going to make that number go way up. "Breast-feeding reduces the risk of certain diseases for infants, not to mention helps women shed pregnancy weight *continued*→



Rigg, right, says most breast-feeding problems can be easily fixed

BOTTOM: LINDSEY DOWELL, HAIR AND MAKEUP: DJ & CO. SALON, AUGUSTA, GA.
OPPOSITE: KATE REEDER. HAIR AND MAKEUP: SUSAN DONOGHUE/ENNIS INC.

gain and fosters a connection between a mom and her baby," says Rigg. **"But when it's too hard or it hurts, many moms end up formula-feeding."**

Her goal is to identify the main barriers to breast-feeding and help moms overcome them, whether it's getting hospitals to provide around-the-clock lactation consultants (many don't), supporting legislation that forces employers to provide a private place to pump (not a broom closet or public bathroom), or even shifting the cultural perception of breast-feeding. "We can bare our breasts sexually, but use them for what they're made for and people freak out," says Rigg, who is a breast cancer survivor. "Feeding your baby in public should not result in evil looks." To show how beautiful breast-feeding can be, Rigg is running public service ads and has teamed up with celebrities, like Gabrielle Reece and Kelly Rutherford, to spread the word.

"When I had my child, breast-feeding was really a struggle," she says. "I don't want other women to go through the confusion and pain that I did. We can all be more successful at it—we just need a little education and help."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW Do your homework before you give birth. "Talk to lactation consultants and spend time with friends who have nursed," she says. To learn more, visit *bestforbabes.org*.

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET See yourself healthy. "I was diagnosed with breast cancer a few years ago, and I practiced mental imagery to feel balanced and empowered," she says. "Now I visualize myself healthy whenever I'm stuck in a rut. It gets me focused and motivated."

Seckler won't stop fighting for her son, Charley, now 9

TURNING CASH INTO A CURE

Tracy Seckler

Until five years ago, Seckler felt her life was charmed. "I had an active, happy, and healthy family," she says. But then her son, Charley, was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), a fatal deteriorating-muscle disease. "Hearing that diagnosis was like being struck by lightning out of a blue sky," she says. As Seckler, 39, researched the possible treatments, she was devastated to discover DMD had no cure. The disease causes children to lose the ability to move every muscle in their bodies, and they ultimately die of heart or respiratory failure. "I kept reading about promising therapies that were in different stages of development but weren't progressing," she says. "Someone needed to ensure that the next steps were taken." So Seckler created Charley's Fund, an organization that raises money to speed up the development of possible DMD treatments.

She began with a letter-writing campaign, and as word spread, the donations grew. **The first $850,000 she raised helped get a drug into clinical trials.** The organization has directed a total of $15 million and has helped fund 18 different research projects around the world. "I'm in a race against time to get an advanced enough treatment to save my son's life," says Seckler. "I believe Charley is holding on as strongly as he is because he knows a cure is coming."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW Don't assume other people are handling things. "I thought that if there was a possible cure for DMD, someone would have already discovered it," she says. "But sometimes things haven't happened yet simply because people haven't made them happen."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET Take care of yourself. "Although I have lots of other commitments, I see a therapist once a week," she says. "Spending 50 minutes in a quiet room sorting through my feelings helps reduce my stress."

"Someone needed to ensure that the next steps were taken."

JANE FELDMAN

Devitt, center, is currently raising money to donate a total of 5,000 rollers to other villages in the area

Village women testing out the new drums

BRINGING WATER TO THE WOMEN OF AFRICA

Sue Devitt

A makeup artist and the creator of her own line of cosmetics, Devitt has always looked for inspiration while traveling to exotic parts of the world. Recently she had the chance to impact one of the places that influenced her. "I named some products after a region in Africa, and a trustee of the Africa Foundation asked if I'd be willing to donate a portion of the proceeds to raise money to open schools in Tanzania and Kenya," she says. Devitt agreed and took a trip to see the schools for herself, where **she was surprised to discover that the problem went beyond education. "Most of the students suffered from some kind of dehydration-related illness,"** she says. So Devitt donated her own time and money to build water-collection tanks and irrigate portions of Tanzania and Kenya.

With that project completed, Devitt turned her sights to a village in Tanzania where the women had to walk five miles round-trip carrying huge containers on their backs just to get water. "They had to do this every single day, even if they were tired or sick, because their families depended on them," she says. Through sales of her products, Devitt helped fund the donation of 50 Hippo Rollers, huge water-holding drums that the women can roll along the ground. "It seemed like such a small thing, but it made a huge difference to them," she says. "There's nothing more gratifying than helping people survive."

WHAT SHE WANTS YOU TO KNOW Turn off the tap. "Water is so precious—don't waste it by letting it flow while you're brushing your teeth or washing dishes!" she says. "Here we take water for granted, but in other parts of the world, it's a luxury."

HER STAY-HEALTHY SECRET Notice how food affects your appearance. "I've found that eating well keeps me feeling *and* looking my best. To make it easy, I grow my own herbs, order fresh fruits and vegetables online, and stop by produce stands on my way home."