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by Elizabeth Shaw | The Flint Journal

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Flintstone Charlie Bell talks to kids about scoring better health



"There's no words for how I felt," an excited April Clifton (left) said about testing the blood pressure of former Flintstone Charlie Bell during a pilot program for the Michigan Vascular Center at Flint Central High School on Tuesday. "I've got bragging rights now," Clifton said. The program not only taught eighth-graders how to test the blood pressure of themselves and others -- like former Flint Southwestern Academy star, Michigan State University star, and-now NBA player, Charlie Bell (right) -- but it also taught them how to go out into their communities to check the blood pressures of others.

FLINT, Michigan -- You might expect NBA basketball hero Charlie Bell to teach kids how to dribble and shoot. But this week the Milwaukee Bucks guard talked to Flint Central eighth-graders about winning with a different set of points: lower blood pressure scores.

Bell's surprise visit to Flint Central health teacher Marsha Snyder's classroom was the kick-off for the Michigan Vascular Center's new pilot program on blood pressure awareness. If successful, the program will eventually reach every eighth grade health class in the Flint school district.

"I was the lucky one out of all the teachers who had the chance to be the first class. We just told the kids there'd be a special guest and snuck him in the side door so we wouldn't end up with chaos," said Snyder, laughing.

As it turned out, the kids didn't even notice the tall guy in the Milwaukee Bucks T-shirt sitting at the back of the room until he was introduced by Michigan Vascular Center technical director Joanne Drago.

"When I saw him I got so shocked, I just started blushing," said April Clifton, 15. "My dad watches basketball every night. I can't wait to tell him about this."

Bell offered up his own arm so technicians from the vascular center could teach students how to use a portable blood pressure monitor. The center bought 40 units so students can take them home for a week to collect blood pressure readings on friends and family.

"When I was coming up we didn't have MySpace or a computer at home so we were always outside, playing basketball with friends. I drive around town now, I hardly see kids out playing ball. They're probably all home playing video games," said Bell, 29, one of the famous Flintstones who took Michigan State University to the NCAA Final Four in 1999.

"I like to get involved in anything that's about getting kids more healthy, telling them: 'You get out of your body what you put into it.'"

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, increases the risk of stroke, heart failure, kidney disease and heart attack. It's known as the silent killer because symptoms often aren't apparent until that fatal end result occurs.

Known for its work in the diagnosis, treatment and research of vascular disease, the Michigan Vascular Center also offers free vascular disease screenings as an ongoing effort to promote community health.

"We see so many individuals in their 30s who are referred to our office because their kidneys have failed due to undiagnosed hypertension," said Dr. Carlo A. Dall'Olmo.

But 90-95 percent of people with hypertension don't even know they have it.

"Sometimes the first manifestation is irreversible kidney disease. So here is a young person whose life is changed forever and it's so sad," said Dall'Olmo. "Our purpose is to bring awareness to a younger age group and empower them to take control of their lives."

The middle school years are a crucial age when hypertension awareness and lifestyle changes could make a real impact on a child's future, Dall'Olmo said.

Each of the 26 students who made it to class Tuesday were treated to a basketball personally autographed for them from Bell. But the big prize will be an autographed jersey, to be given to the student who collects the most blood pressure readings during the week-long project.

"Oh, all you gonna lose, I just want you to know that," a grinning April shouted at her classmates. "I'm gonna go round my whole neighborhood and get anybody I can. And I am so gonna hang it up when I win it."