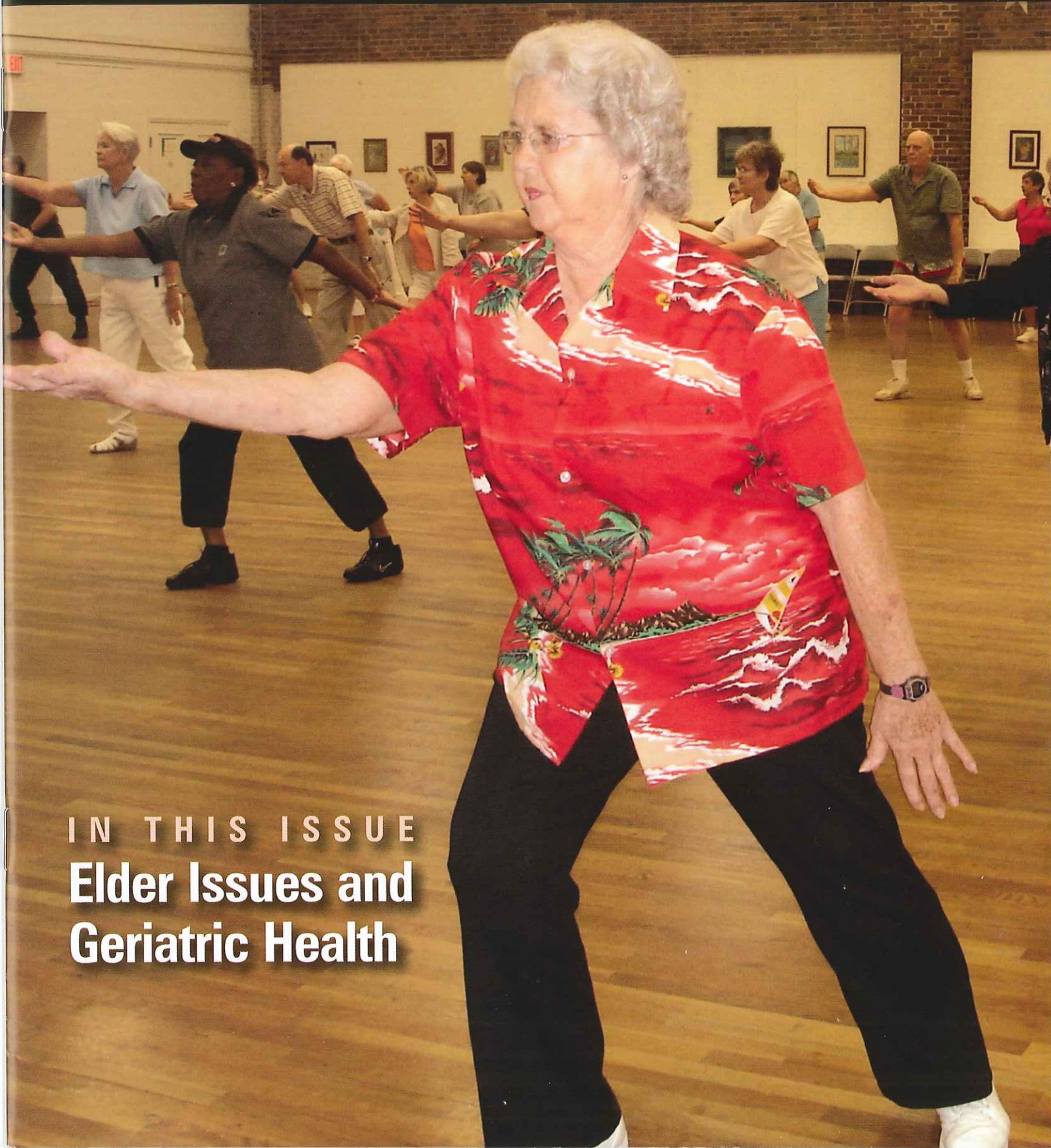


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**Elder Issues and
Geriatric Health**

THE OVERTOWN COOKBOOK: PRO

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Overtown, a pioneer African-American Miami-Dade community, was once the center of black culture and history dating back to the founding of Miami at the end of the 19th century. In the center of Overtown is the Lyric Theater, opened in 1913, where talented musicians and artists still perform today. Overtown was once a viable and thriving community of approximately 40,000 residents. These residents included the same classes of professionals and paraprofessionals that could be found in any other thriving community in America during this era. In the mid-1960s, the community was devastated and fractured when the Florida Department of Transportation constructed the I-95 expressway through the heart of Overtown despite community opposition, forcing the exodus of the majority of community residents.¹ Overtown's current population is reported to be around 8,000. With limited opportunities for employment and upward mobility and a lack of affordable home ownership, many of Overtown's remaining rental properties have fallen into disrepair. Notwithstanding these challenges, the community is struggling to revitalize and maintain its viability through its historical legacy and social activism to bring about social change.

For many elders, a sense of connection to community and continuity with the past is an important component of well-being. A key repercussion of the construction of I-95 was the temporary closing of Booker T. Washington High School (BTW). BTW was the first high school for "negroes" in South Florida. This school was viewed as a key community asset by Overtown's pioneer residents. The temporary closing of this proud institution disrupted a valuable mechanism for communicating the oral traditions, hardships and lessons learned from elders to youth. Today, this historical institution is still viewed in the same light by Overtown's residents and boasts one of the strongest alumni associations in Miami. It also provides a valuable asset for elders to maintain social connections and promote community projects.

Overtown is also home of the Jackson Memorial Hospital (JMH) family medicine residency clinic. A participatory pilot



BTW teacher Tony Jennings and his mother. Both attended BTW in their youth and have contributed traditional family recipes to the project.

study² of health disparities in Overtown found mortality rates 34 percent higher for diabetes and 25 percent higher for cardiovascular disease than the overall county rates — the most common conditions affecting the elderly. Because nutrition education and exercise play such a key role in the pathogenesis of these chronic diseases, and because of the unique history and culture of the community, the concept of the Overtown Diet emerged.

Subsequently, the Historic Overtown Public Health Empowerment (HOPE) Collaborative was formed to create culturally appropriate strategies and to design activities to improve the health of the community. Through a collaborative effort, the Historic Overtown 2.5 K Run/Walk and the Overtown Diet Cook-Off was hosted in January 2007 as a part of the **Super Bowl XLI Kickoff to Better Health.**⁴ By involving a large number of students at BTW, we aimed to utilize them as community "change agents." The alumni association proved to be the key organization for engaging elders and connecting with tradition.

The event started with a run/walk highlighting Overtown's historic places, where elders walked and students ran. The race culminated at BTW, where all participants and members of the community gathered to take part in the many health-oriented events, including nutrition education and cardiovascular, depression and vision screenings. NFL players and cheerleaders attended the evening's event in celebration of healthy habits. During the course of the day, more than 800 students, teachers, parents, alumni and community members were present at the event.

A Nutrition and Culture-Conscious Cook-Off highlighted the day's events. The preparations began months earlier. The Twister Café is an innovative inclusion program in which trainable mentally handicapped students (TMH) work in a functioning café, while culinary arts students work alongside them. Two classroom sessions were geared to nutrition workshops with a dietitian. Subsequently, the students worked with traditional recipes donated from the local Jackson's Soul Food Restaurant and from teachers and community members, who

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shared recipes handed down from generation to generation. Eight teams of TMH and culinary students paired with teachers and community elders were formed to compete, aided by celebrity chef Shawn "Rakkasan Chef" Fralin, nutritionists and other volunteers. Alumni and elders in the community played a key advisory role, as student team-leaders were challenged to give the traditional favorite recipes a modern makeover using healthier ingredients, fewer calories, more whole grains and less saturated and trans fats. BTW's Honor Students designed and implemented the judging criteria that was used in judging the recipes on healthy nutritional values, authenticity, taste and cost. Other students participated in contests for essays, business plans and artwork for the *Overtown Cookbook*. Contest winners were announced, and prizes, including a \$500 scholarship, were awarded.

These and other recipes will be published in the *Overtown Cookbook*, which is being developed as a part of a collaborative after-school service-learning project that aims to improve the health of both elders and youth, simultaneously teaching about nutrition, honoring community heritage and supporting intergenerational social networks. Family medicine residents learn about the community, and how to promote health in a culturally appreciative manner. Future projects include exploring the relationship of emotions and thoughts associated with food and teaching how to buy the best quality of food for the money. By seeking recipes and guidance from all generations that we hope to educate on nutrition and healthy lifestyle, we are all learning about tradition, community and health.

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Overtown Cook-Off judging table

Affiliations

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