

# Woman aims to 'Shape Up' community, Mississippi

"Mississippi holds the heavyweight title in the U.S. ... time to take that title away"



Getty Images  
Linda Fondren credits her husband, Jim, and daughter, Cristina Goodlow, for supporting her efforts in getting people to lose weight.

- Obesity factored in the death of her 54-year-old sister, Mary Washington, in

2006.

- Two-thirds of residents of Vicksburg, a city of 26,000, are overweight or obese.
- For the last six years, Mississippi has ranked the heaviest in the country, with

more than a fifth of its youngsters obese. [TheGrio's 100 Making](#)



By **Sevil Omer** Writer/editor

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Listen up America: Linda Fondren is on a mission to reshape Mississippi.

The 55-year-old mother from Vicksburg, Miss., moved young and old in efforts to get her community to lose weight. Now she seeks a similar goal — move Mississippi from fattest to fittest.

"Mississippi holds the heavyweight title in the U.S.," said Fondren, who is among [theGrio's notable 100 History Makers in the Making](#). "It's time to get rid of that title. Time to get moving."

The reasons behind her drive:

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our schools. We need physical activity. We have become sedentary because of technology. Physical education needs to go hand-in-hand with education."

**'Community support'**

Nationwide, one in three youngsters are overweight or obese because of a lack of exercise and diets loaded with sugar and fat. Experts have repeatedly warned that obesity is the leading risk factor for cardiovascular disease, certain types of cancer, and type 2 diabetes.



Mario Tama / Getty Images file  
First lady Michelle Obama participates in "Let's Move" in a school in Harlem, N.Y. She also made a similar stop in Mississippi in March 2010.

To counteract the unhealthy trend, Fondren used her time and money to open an all-female gym, Shape Up Sisters, in 2006. She offered free nutrition and work out classes to anyone who has needed it. Women streamed in. The workout facility now enrolls 400 members, she said.

To get her city moving, Fondren created Shape Up Vicksburg, a 17-week weight loss challenge that has evolved into a community walking club. She recruited the town mayor, the police chief, school cafeteria workers, teachers and restaurant owners. Since October's launch, Vicksburg residents have lost 15,000 pounds.

"Obesity is no longer a personal matter, it affects us all," Fondren said. "What really needs to happen now is a national attention in

First lady Michelle Obama has been out campaigning for Let's Move, a campaign that

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highlights the importance of physical activity and healthy eating for children in an effort to combat childhood obesity. Retailers, such as Wal-Mart, have also promised to carry healthier food alternatives.

Fondren's commitment to reshape lives has also gained national attention. Honored as [CNN's Local Hero of 2010](#), Mississippi officials are now watching her efforts, claiming she has found the key to success.

"One of the most important things is the community and its support," said Dr. Mary Currier, Mississippi's health officer. "And from I have heard about (Fondren's) community efforts is wonderful. This is an issue we all need to work on."

Currier said school kitchens are beginning to use more ovens instead of deep fryers in food preparation. Restaurants are offering healthier meal choices on menus. City mayors and council members are encouraged to support a healthier work force.

Currier said she embraces everyone who is in the battle against the bulge.

Fondren is front and center in the state's fight.

## Black History Month

"Most people do not know that they have a weight problem because we live in an environment where everyone almost looks the same," Fondren said.

### 'Linda saved my life'

Ebony Fisher, 22, never imagined she would weigh more than an NFL linebacker, topping the scales at 324 pounds.

Fisher moved to Vicksburg from Detroit, Mich., nearly two years ago and quietly packed on the pounds.

"The fridge was my best friend," Fisher said.

Her real shocker came when she went to see the doctor for a check up last year.

"The nurse looked at me and asked 'How much do you think you weigh?' and I thought maybe 200 or so pounds," Fisher said. "I stepped on the scale and it read 324 pounds. I lost my heart right there on the scale. My breath was gone. I was knocked out. I left the doctor's office."

A few days later, she walked into Fondren's gym with a plea to lose weight.

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"I told my mom if I do not lose weight, I am going to die. I wanted to go to the gym. I wanted to go. But there was no way I could afford to go," she said.

Fondren quickly managed to match Fisher's struggle with the gym's needs: Hire Fisher to provide childcare for members in exchange for gym fees.

Fisher said she started walking on the treadmill every day for a few minutes, building up her endurance and finding a balance of fitness and nutrition to help her ward off weight gain. She became a vegetarian and revved up her fitness level with strength training and cardio work outs.

"I don't know where I would be if there was no Linda," said Fisher, who has lost 50 pounds. She wants to lose an additional 100 pounds and she is confident she will reach that goal, thanks to Fondren. "Linda saved my life."

**Other names in theGrio's 100 include:**

- [Don Peebles](#), one of the most successful Real Estate entrepreneurs in the nation.
- [Donald Glover](#), a comedian and "Community" star.
- [Janelle Monae](#), a singer and songwriter.
- [Keith Ellison](#), first Muslim elected to Congress.

- [Donya Douglas](#), a NASA engineer with areas of expertise including research and development of two-phase thermal

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