

Working Out in the Workplace

Debra Wein helps workers to shed pounds and employers to shave costs with motivating nutrition and fitness strategies.

BY ANDREW CLARK

In her nutrition career of nearly two decades, Debra Wein '90 has sampled a smorgasbord of roles, tasting satisfaction every time. Entrepreneur, registered dietitian, college instructor—name it, and there's a good chance Wein has done it.

In Wein's eyes, her pursuits are all connected, because she focuses on improving the lives of people.

"I really enjoy helping people find that 'aha' moment when they realize the importance of fitness and nutrition," says Wein, who graduated with a degree in nutritional sciences and is a registered dietitian, a licensed dietitian/nutritionist, and a certified specialist in sports dietetics. "It's not just about nutrition. It's about helping people embrace the bigger picture of life."

Currently, Wein is president of Wellness Workdays, a company that helps employers improve the health of their workers. Her company assists groups of all sizes to develop an overall wellness strategy and create customized programs for employees. That includes ideas to ensure weight management, reduced stress, proper sleep, smoking cessation, and increased physical activity.

Using evidence-based approaches, Wellness Workdays develops wellness programs and challenges that motivate employees to join together to embrace healthier habits. Goals are set—be it pounds lost, miles walked, or cigarettes extinguished—and workforces strive to hit their mark. The results are stunning. In 2011, 1,227 individuals participated in Wellness Workdays fitness challenges through their employer; together they dropped 3,819 pounds, exercised 43,995 hours, and ate 335,063 servings of fruits and vegetables.

Enabling the health of employees serves the financial health of the business. Fitter employees are less likely to miss work and more apt to avoid chronic diseases that drive up health care costs. According to Wellness Workdays, heart disease can cost employers an extra \$19,000 per employee a year, diabetes can cost almost \$12,000, and obesity \$2,500.

Wein says that fostering an enjoyable workplace is just as important as encouraging physical health, because happy employees are more



likely to be productive. Team fitness challenges help boost employee morale and unite workers around a common goal.

"It's always exciting for me when I'm able to sell others on a healthy lifestyle," Wein says. "It really impacts me when I hear someone say, 'I turned 50 and my doctor said my weight and cholesterol were too high, and your program has changed my life.'"

A winning formula

Wein launched Wellness Workdays less than five years ago, but the company has already gained a large following: from institutions like Harvard Business School, Brown University, and MIT to major corporate clients like Putnam Investments and Perkin Elmer. Even Tommy Thompson, the former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, has praised Wellness Workdays for its approach.

How effective has Wein's company been? She shared the story of a financial services company that implemented an eight-week challenge designed by Wellness Workdays. By the end of the period, participants lost a total of 1,161 pounds and exercised 7,195 hours, and six smokers committed to quitting.

Going beyond fitness challenges, Wein and her team offer on-site assessment services and fitness classes, monthly lectures, walking programs, newsletters, and branded websites.

"To best partner with our client, we look for ways to utilize the services that are already available to them, such as employee assistance programs, health care providers, local restaurants, regional and national health associations, business professionals, and on-site cafeteria personnel," Wein says. "This is a win-win strategy."

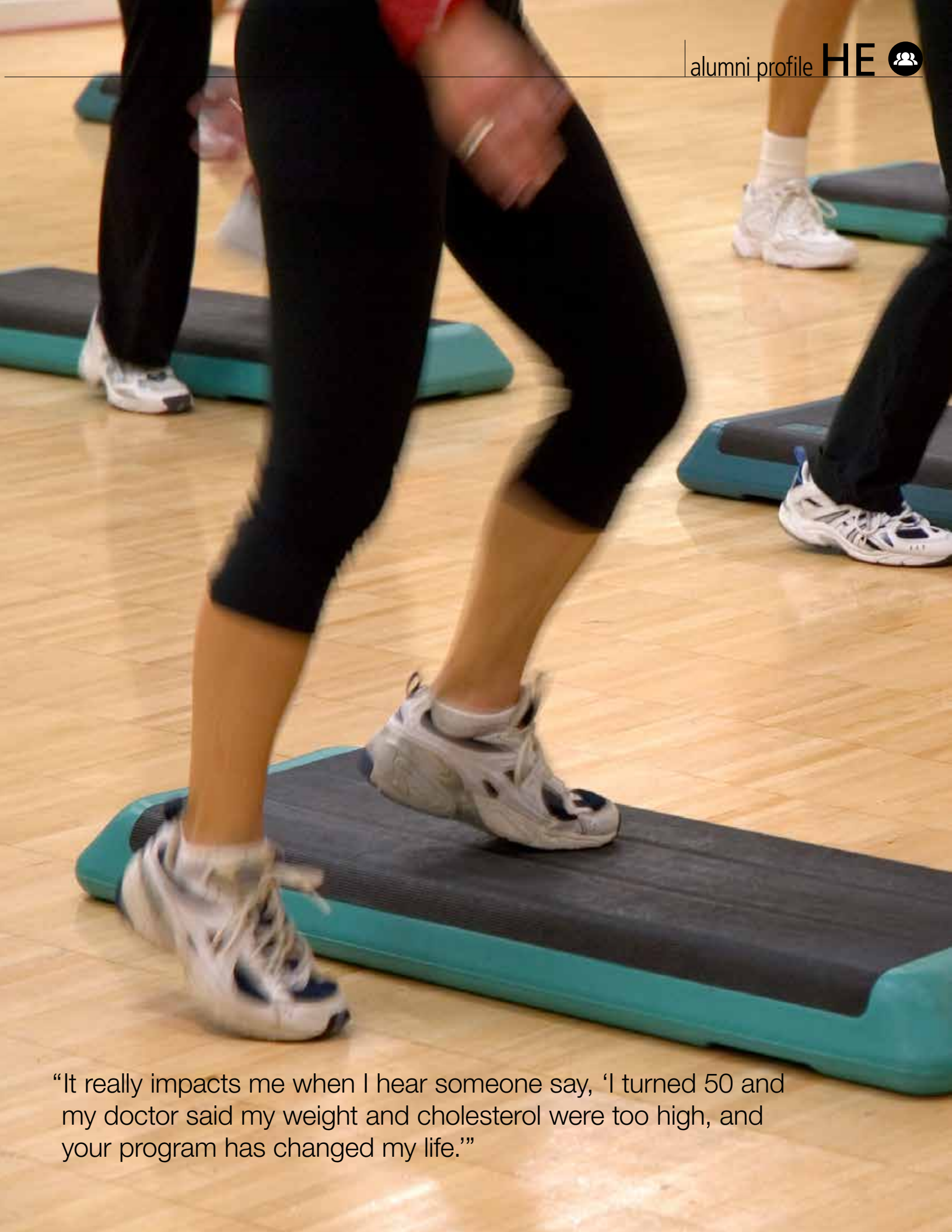
When she's not helping employees adopt healthy habits, Wein teaches undergraduate nutrition classes at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She also teaches graduate classes at nearby Simmons College and lectures to dancers at the Boston Conservatory of Music on weight management and nutrition.

Wein, who lives on the south shore of Massachusetts with her husband and two young children, still keeps close ties to Cornell. She was recently appointed to the President's Council of Cornell Women and spoke at a women entrepreneurs panel at the 2012 Entrepreneurship@Cornell conference.

Her Cornell connections keep her current with the latest findings in the fields of wellness and nutrition, which have changed considerably since her graduation in 1990. New studies are released seemingly every day, and keeping informed can be challenging.

"The field definitely gets more and more confusing for clients," Wein says. "These days, people know less about what they're supposed to eat, how often they're supposed to exercise, and what they should do to stay healthy. What I'm trying to do is make wellness sensible and accessible for everyone."

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