

LIFE FORC

T exan (and honorary Malibu man) Matthew McConaughey is famed not only for his hit films—*The Lincoln Lawyer*, *Tropic Thunder*, *Killer Joe*—but also for his traffic-stopping, handsome looks. Still, his good deeds might eclipse the seemingly indelible public impression of those cerulean blue eyes and washboard abs.

McConaughey, 42, is the force behind J.K. Livin' Foundation (jklivinfoundation.org), which funds an after-school fitness and wellness program for some of the nation's most vulnerable inner-city teenagers. J.K. Livin' is shorthand for "just keep living," a personal mantra inspired by the passing of his father, who died just as the actor's career went full tilt with 1993's cult classic *Dazed and Confused*.

The actor, now starring in the Steven Soderbergh comedy *Magic Mike*, which premieres June 29, was interested in working with teens who are "in that transition age, where the consequences aren't just another demerit if you screw

Actor and dad
of two **Matthew
McConaughey**
inspires at-risk
teens to stay
well and just
keep living the
healthy way

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up again.” So he designed a program that “prevents before you need to cure,” he says.

Live and Learn

Launched in 2008 in Venice, Calif., in public schools serving low-income districts, the program is equal parts exercise regimen, nutrition plan, support group, community outreach, and safe haven. It welcomes high school boys and girls looking to escape the concrete jungle after the last school bell rings and before a parent returns home from work.

With additional locations in Dallas and Austin, Texas, plus a recent expansion into New Orleans, J.K. Livin’ meets on school campuses twice each week for two hours. The sessions center on themed monthly lesson plans created by McConaughey, the program’s fitness director and phys ed teacher Missy Shepherd, Los Angeles-based nutritionist Rachel Beller, MS, RD, and kids’ publishing giant Scholastic. The first 30 minutes are devoted to talking and learning, and the rest of the time is for “moving their bodies and exercising,” the actor says.

The 14 active J.K. Livin’ programs serve an average of 50 kids per school and have helped more than 2,000 teens since the foundation’s launch. Each group has its own flow and nuances, but one unifying factor is the promise to set and attain personal fitness goals, whether it’s to make the soccer team or run a 10-minute



“WE WANT KIDS TO HAVE AND TO UNDERSTAND GRATITUDE, TO OPEN DOORS TO NEW THINGS COMING INTO YOUR LIFE.”

mile. “It’s not about someone becoming a decathlete or cover girl,” McConaughey says, explaining that striving for fitness builds more than healthy bodies—it builds “all-important self-esteem” among a group that often fails to reach its potential and is

troubled by poor grades, poor health, and low graduation rates.

Positive Proof

The idea, then, is to both break a sweat and open a mind. With a staff of district teachers and coaches recruited and paid by J.K. Livin’ for their after-school participation, the program offers kids much-needed emotional and physical guidance. For McConaughey, that guidance begins with learning to count your blessings—and maintaining a positive attitude.

“We want the kids to have and to understand gratitude...to open doors to new things coming into your life,” he says, pointing to the “gratitude circle,” an integral part of the program during which kids discuss what they are thankful for. “When kids finally get comfortable enough to be part of the gratitude circle—and that’s not an easy thing, because saying ‘thank you’ when you’re 17 in front of a bunch of people is not really cool—I was most surprised when they were thankful [for] the foundation, that they now had a safe place to go.”

PREVIOUS PAGE: JEFF LIPSKY/GETTY SYNDICATION; JON SOOHOOLA/DODGERS 2009



McConaughey and San Francisco 49ers football players worked out with students in the “J.K. Livin’ Play 60” campaign at the 49ers Academy School.

Many of the program’s participants come from single-parent homes, some with a harried mother struggling to keep it all together. Many have expressed surprise, McConaughey marvels, that J.K. Livin’ is willing to give them so much time and attention. Others, he says, report: “‘I’m less stressed when I get home [now]. I’ve got more respect for all my mom does, how hard she works. You showed me that.’”

McConaughey credits his own father, who “always taught me to give back,” with inspiring him to launch the foundation. It’s also the reason the actor expects the program’s kids to show up for their communities.

“Yeah, it’s free,” he says of his foundation. “But it can’t be a one-way street! You get more out of what’s given to you when what’s given to you demands you give something back. We introduced community service. I didn’t know how the kids would react. I thought they’d say, ‘No, man, I ain’t giving up my Saturday to go down and pack up food for the troops in Afghanistan!’ But they love it and fully participate. They take more pride, and it gives the program a little more teeth, because it demands time and effort from the kids. They love that responsibility.”

He shows up for them, too, frequently surprising “his” kids at all 14 locations when he’s not shooting a film. “He’ll call me and say, ‘I’m going to join the kids for a jog,’” says Shannon Rotenberg, the foundation’s executive director. “He’s there, working out with them, all the time.”

McConaughey also talks and lives the importance of staying positive, which he says he learned from his hard-working

McConaughey in his breakout hit *Dazed and Confused*, *The Wedding Planner* with Jennifer Lopez, and *Magic Mike*, opening June 29, with Channing Tatum.



FROM LEFT: EVERETT COLLECTION; MARY EVANS/EVERETT COLLECTION; CLAUDETTE BARIUS

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

More than 72 million children age 18 years and younger live in the United States. An astonishing 31.9 million of these kids are in low-income families, with 15.5 million in “poor” families, defined by federal standards as households earning \$22,050 or less per year. According to Yumiko Aratani, PhD, senior research associate at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), low-income children need several things to succeed academically, physically, socially, and professionally. Exercise and healthful eating are just a part of the puzzle, she says.

Poor kids need the basics. This means steady, nourishing diets—plus plenty of structure and TLC. “NCCP’s research shows that about one-third of America’s children living in poverty lack consistent access to adequate food,” Aratani says. But changing unhealthy eating habits isn’t enough. “Previous research finds that to become resilient, children need a close relationship to a caring parental figure, plus parenting styles that are warm, structured, and involve high expectations,” she says.

Good food and good grades are linked. Aratani says “children with healthy diets are less likely to report depression and stress. And exercise is also known to prevent depression and stress and promote self-esteem.” In other words, when a kid feels good about himself, he’s more likely to care about achievement. Aratani adds that “a combination of healthy eating and exercise can contribute to high school graduation” rates, even among the poorest of teens.

Mentoring works. J.K. Livin’ aims to provide adult guidance to kids who need it most. Aratani points to a recent NCCP study evaluating the effectiveness of youth-development programs: The results emphasized “the importance of a caring adult-youth relationship,” she says. “Mentors help establish an identity independent from family... and can provide guidance and protection.” She stresses, however, that it’s crucial to create meaningful, sustainable mentor-mentee matches, with mentors undergoing “careful screening, training, and supervision” for effective results.—LPK

parents. (Dad ran an oil pipe supply business; Mom was a substitute schoolteacher.) “One adage we grew up on was: ‘You sound like the kid who’s gripin’ about not having any shoes. But what about the kid with no feet?’ What do you say to that?”

The actor says such life lessons led to “not taking things for granted. I remind myself each day: This day wasn’t

guaranteed. You woke up. Your kids are healthy. Your woman’s good. You got a house. You put meals on the table. I’m not saying I don’t need to do more in life. I’m saying you better damn well be gratified, and if you don’t shake hands and say thank you—whether that’s to yourself or to God—it’s really gonna stop the circulation and keep other good things from coming into your life.”

FATHER KNOWS BEST

Father's Day is upon us, so we asked the star of *Magic Mike* to share life lessons he learned from his dad, James, who died 19 years ago. Matthew McConaughey relates some wise advice that guides him as well as the kids he mentors at the J.K. Livin' Foundation.

"Lend a helping hand when you can." The J.K. Livin' Foundation has mentored about 2,000 teenagers since 2008, with aims of becoming a pilot program for schools across the nation.

"Have a good work ethic. Respect the value of a dollar." The star has worked steadily in both blockbusters and smaller films since his first breakout role in 1993. He lives quietly with his family in Austin, Texas.

"Get outdoors when you can." McConaughey has made headlines for camping in an Airstream trailer on the beaches of Malibu.

"Life ain't easy. And nobody said it would be." Bromance buddy and fellow Texan Lance Armstrong has had his ups and downs, both professionally and personally. McConaughey has long cheered on the champion cyclist and cancer survivor.

"Always root for the underdog." The actor earned rave reviews for his inspiring performance in the true-story drama, *We Are Marshall*, in which he plays the coach to a demoralized team of college football players who've just lost members of their squad to a plane crash.

"Don't say 'I can't.' But you can say, 'I'm having trouble.'" The actor lost his father right around the time he landed his first big break in 1993. But he found success after grief.

"Respect women." His romantic comedies—*Failure to Launch*, *Fool's Gold*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* among them—pit smart women against less-than-perfect lotharios who rise to the occasion.

"Just keep livin'." McConaughey ad-libbed these words in his first hit, *Dazed and Confused*, and continues to be inspired by them.—LPK



McConaughey and fiancée Camila Alves, with their kids, Vida and Levi.

Soul Food

Staying positive is one thing—getting and staying healthy is another. Take food, for example. Dietitian Beller, nutritionist on NBC's *The Biggest Loser* and founder of L.A.'s Beller Nutrition Institute, provides monthly food tips for the J.K. Livin' program. She develops "budget-friendly, healthy recipes that kids can make at home and share with their families," she says.

"These kids simply need to be shown that a nutritional action plan is a reality for them," Beller says. "They don't see it working within their lives until you make concrete suggestions. I came up

with one lesson called Making Fiber Your BFF. Instead of eating a blueberry muffin for breakfast—which is basically eating cake, costs almost \$3, and is roughly 500 calories—I suggest steel-cut oatmeal. It costs 50 to 70 cents. Add an apple and some cinnamon, and you've got a delicious, nutritious meal that will fuel your morning. Even high-fiber cereal with some milk in a [to-go] cup works, if a kid is pressed for time. It's about making the right choices."

Establishing healthy eating habits is especially important for kids in poverty, adds Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD,



McConaughey and Alves at a 2011 Fashion Week event.

MPH, RD, professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health, where she launched the ongoing research program Project EAT (Eating Among Teens).

Her research shows that ethnically diverse boys are struggling with their weight more than their Caucasian counterparts, she says. "The prevalence of obesity among [American] boys increased by 7.8% from 1999 to 2010, with large ethnic/racial disparities. In black boys, the prevalence of obesity increased from 14.4% to 21.5%, and among Hispanic boys, obesity prevalence increased from 19.7% to 33.6%."

Obesity did not increase as drastically among ethnically diverse girls during the last decade. But research done in 2010 by the University of California, San Francisco, and published in *Pediatrics* shows that black, Hispanic, and Native American girls in fifth, seventh, and ninth grades in California were two to three times more likely to have a high body mass index (BMI) than white girls the same age.

Learning to eat right is important for many reasons, not all of them health-related, says Neumark-Sztainer. Something as simple as establishing a healthy breakfast routine, as Beller suggests, can improve a child's success at school. "Breakfast is linked to a number of positive outcomes, such as lower risk for

obesity, but also better academic outcomes," she says.

J.K. Livin' participants reflect this academic upswing. According to the foundation's research, since the program's launch, 75% of its kids improved academically. In addition, 96% either improved or maintained good behavior at school, and 81% improved attendance.

Fit First

The program's primary focus is fitness, a topic McConaughey knows a thing or two about—as anyone who's seen tabloid photos of him frolicking on the beach with his Brazilian-model fiancée, Camila Alves, and their son, Levi, 3, and daughter, Vida, 2, can tell.

He works with a trainer doing plyometrics, a high-intensity regimen that incorporates powerful movements and explosive exercises. But the actor laughingly admits he'll do all sorts of activities to stay fit, "whether that's dancin', hikin', chasin' a pig, catchin' a rooster, or runnin' around following the dog-gone kids and saying, 'I'm gonna go everywhere they go for an hour and a half.' We've got eight acres [in Austin, where the family is based], so let's head out and go explore! I find myself up in a tree, down in a gully...you can break a sweat that way, too."

While McConaughey consumes loads of fresh vegetables, salads, lean meats, and fish—"I could eat salmon every night of the week," he says—he also refuses to obsess about his diet. "I'm not puritanical at all," he insists. "The pleasure of eating something you really love, if you're doing it in moderation, is really good for you." His indulgence food? A cheeseburger. "There's no way I'm feeling guilty about it!"

The foundation's teens keep McConaughey engaged with the next generation—and then, of course, there's Levi and Vida, who often accompany their famous dad on location. "My acting's getting better because I play make-believe better," the film star says. "You learn that from kids."

He says he's always dreamed of parenthood, especially since he was so influenced by his own father. "Life was good before, but now after having a family, children, a wonderful woman, there's just more to live for," he says with passion. "I've got this really glorious responsibility to shepherd these children. And to pass on what I know to them sooner than

“IT'S LIKE MAKING FILMS. THIS IS THE EPIC, RAISING CHILDREN. YOU'RE HANDS-ON DIRECTING THAT FILM.”

I found out in my life, but not too soon so as not to let them grow up at their own pace. That is an incredible art."

He pauses, then waxes cinematic on the "art" of guiding young people, whether they're his own or the kids he mentors through J.K. Livin'. "It's like making films. This is the epic, raising children. You're hands-on directing that film, the film of your children's life. And they'll go on and start writing their own story without [my hand] to guide them.

"And that's got to be one of the proudest and most glorious things for a parent to see—not what they do during the first 18 years, but after they leave the nest. And I can't wait! I'm not in a rush to get there—it's a ball right now. But it's something I always knew I wanted to be—a father."

In the meantime, McConaughey continues to prepare growing numbers of J.K. Livin' kids for successful, fulfilling futures. His foundation is not only helping them improve their school attendance, behavior, and academic performance—the teens have told him they appreciate the feeling of protection the program provides.

"They said to me: 'I was under so much social pressure to hang with certain kids after school, gangs here and there. Now I have a healthy place to come.' And I don't overlook the simplicity of that." ■

