

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
Thursday, February 23, 2006

Playing by heart

Rutland man invents healthy board game

By Linda Jones McCarthy CORRESPONDENT

RUTLAND— There's a new game in town, and if John R. Blanchette of Rutland has any say in the matter, families everywhere will be playing his creation, a board game called Heart Attack.

But first, students in the Worcester public schools will have the opportunity to try out the game, which teaches heart attack facts in a fun way in the hope of changing attitudes about food and exercise.

Mr. Blanchette met recently with U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern, D-Worcester, who, after a 20-minute discussion and demonstration of the game, said schools could benefit educationally from the games being used in the classroom.

The congressman then set up a meeting with Colleen O'Brien, health director for Worcester public schools, who supported the game.

"Our health teachers and I are looking forward to receiving these educational games to reinforce our health lessons on heart disease prevention for students," Ms. O'Brien said. "I feel that something like this is not only innovative but would be especially useful since it's presented in the format of a game."

With financial backing from Webster Five Cent Savings, 42 complimentary editions of the game will be presented to the school system at a ceremony Tuesday. They will be used in sixth-grade classrooms.

"I'm thrilled," Mr. Blanchette said. "I would love to get this game into every school in the country. Maximum exposure will mean maximum education and preventative awareness."

According to Mr. Blanchette, for adults Heart Attack is a game balancing fun and seriousness. For children, it's a game that's seriously funny.

"When I was 18," Mr. Blanchette said, "I started having dizzy spells. I had a complete physical and all was fine except for high blood pressure. At that tender age, I had to find out about all kinds of things I should or should not do to maintain a healthy life."

The lesson from that experience was not lost on him, he said.



I would love to get this game into every school in the country. Maximum exposure will mean maximum education and preventative awareness.

John R. Blanchette

"I aged, married, had kids and, like most parents, played games with my children. At some point it occurred to me that if I could take my knowledge of heart disease, stroke, cancer, obesity and diabetes and partner that knowledge with playing pieces in the hands of adults and children trying to avoid the hospital, OR and ICU, the end result would be a game where every one wins."

In the game, players start in the "delivery room" with a clean bill of health, then move around the board as they pass through life. Along the way, they learn about factors that help and hinder good health as they gain or lose cholesterol by landing on spaces or drawing cards that put them in healthy or unhealthy situations. Players may end up in the hospital and sometimes surgery is necessary. Some players even end up in intensive care, possibly for an extended stay.

The target audience for Mr. Blanchette is children and families. "Kids will hopefully get into good habits early in life," he said. "This awareness will help prevent health problems rather than trying to fix them after the fact."

"All players learn about ways to improve their chances for a healthier life," he said. "The game is unpredictable, and the ending is never certain until the final roll of the dice."

The game is uncomplicated, with almost all the directions right on the board. "Kids 6 and up can beat their parents without the parents having to let them win," Mr. Blanchette said.

Since early childhood, Mr. Blanchette has been an entrepreneur. He sold greeting cards door to door, shoveled snow, had a paper route and did painting and carpentry as a high school student. The key to running a successful business, he said, is his "D to the 5th power" theory, which he refers to simply as "D-5." The five Ds, he said, are desire, dedication, diligence, discipline and details.

As proof of the success of his theory, Mr. Blanchette points to the three businesses he owns and operates: Alltight Roof Doctor, a roofing contractor business; Ascend Products, an online men's grooming products business; and Table Top Games Inc., the company he formed to market the Heart Attack game.

In addition, Mr. Blanchette operates the annual Spookwalk in Rutland and donates the proceeds to area charities.

When he came up with the idea of Heart Attack, Mr. Blanchette knew that his first order of business was protection. With assistance from a lawyer, he obtained a patent, copyrights and trademark protection for the game, its name and its various elements, including packaging.

After design of the game was complete, he spent tens of thousands of dollars to have the first 5,000 copies manufactured by Grand Prix International of Indian Orchard. He also hired a marketing consultant to help generate interest in the game.

The research and development took years, followed by countless hours of play testing, he noted.

The result, Mr. Blanchette said, is an educational game for all ages that he hopes will not only be a success but also a prescription for a healthier America. To that end, he is working to extend the reach of the game beyond Worcester.

"We are currently trying to facilitate partnering with the American Heart Association and becoming involved with their national obesity campaign," he said. Mr. Blanchette said the Heart Attack game can be previewed at www.HeartAttackGame.com and can be purchased there for \$29.99. "Be careful, though," he warns, "the fun is contagious — cross my heart."