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BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

CrossFit Downey owner Oscar Ramos works to shatter cultural ties to Big Soda and educate his mostly Hispanic membership on the dangers of sugary beverages.



As a child, Oscar Ramos was not allowed to go outside to play unless he drank his entire “fat bottle” of lime-flavored Gatorade.

A 32-ounce bottle of the so-called thirst quencher contains 56 grams of sugar, or about 14 teaspoons—more than double the 6-teaspoon daily limit the World Health Organization recommends for normal-weight adults. Added sugar is [linked to metabolic and chronic diseases](#) including obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Today, 37-year-old Ramos knows better than to drink Gatorade, soda or other sugar-sweetened beverages. But that’s not the case for all of his members at CrossFit Downey in Southern California, or for his mother-in-law, a Type 2 diabetic who injects insulin and continues to drink soda weekly.

“It’s our culture,” said Ramos, who is half Mexican and half Puerto Rican. “It’s gnarly.”

Hispanics have some of the highest percentages of diagnosed diabetes in the United States: 12.8 percent, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s [“National Diabetes Statistics Report, 2014.”](#) Other minority groups fared just as poorly or worse: Non-Hispanic blacks were at 13.2 percent, and American Indians and Alaska natives were at 15.9. Meanwhile, non-Hispanic whites were at 7.6 percent.

A likely cause, public-health advocates say, is Big Soda’s targeting of Hispanics in its marketing efforts.

The disparities between black and brown communities and white communities “can’t be understated,” said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the [California Center for Public Health Advocacy](#).

“The message needs to get out that the beverage industry is targeting low-income communities and communities of color with their marketing, and those communities are seeing those effects.”

The effects, he said, not only include chronic disease but also [blindness and limb amputation](#).

Lower-income black and Hispanic neighborhoods were home to more outdoor advertisements for sugar-sweetened beverages than lower-income white and higher-income neighborhoods in 2009, according to the [Center for Science in the Public Interest \(CSPI\)](#). In 2013, Hispanic youth were 93 percent more likely to visit beverage-company websites when compared with all youth, according to the CSPI.

“We know that 86 percent of the growth through 2020 for Coca-Cola’s youth-target market will come from multicultural consumers, especially Hispanic, and focusing on this segment



Oscar Ramos (left) grew up drinking sugar-sweetened beverages. He welcomed CrossFit’s California Invasion to his gym, CrossFit Downey, on Nov. 12.

is critical to the company’s future growth,” Bea Perez, then-chief marketing officer for The Coca-Cola Co., [was quoted as saying in 2011](#).

This is what Ramos must battle as he attempts to educate athletes at his gym, which sits a mile northwest of a Coca-Cola bottling plant in a city with the [oldest continuously operating McDonald’s](#) and the [country’s first Taco Bell](#).

“At the end of the day, the numbers speak for themselves,” he said shortly after CrossFit Inc. Founder and CEO Greg Glassman addressed roughly 75 people on Nov. 12 at Ramos’ affiliate.

CrossFit Downey was the fourth stop on CrossFit’s [“California Invasion: Rally to Fight Big Soda”](#) affiliate tour.

There, Glassman explained why he is asking the CrossFit community to support a [California Senate bill](#) requiring health-warning labels on sugar-sweetened beverages.

“I want to drive the American Beverage Association and its constituent partners out of the health sciences,” he explained.

The taint of Big Soda, Glassman said, has manifested itself in three ways: the [toxicity of its sugary beverages](#), its [corruption of the health sciences](#) and its [financing of legislative efforts](#) to require licensure for personal trainers that would criminalize CrossFit coaching.

“The corruption is chilling,” Glassman said. “And the corruption begins with Dollar 1.”

He continued: “The toxicity of the product warrants the label. The corruption of the sciences warrants the label.”

For his part, Ramos was grateful that Glassman cared enough about the members of his community to explain why he was asking them to contact local elected officials about the health-warning label via [CrushBigSoda.com](#).

“I think it just clarifies what the purpose is,” Ramos said of Glassman’s talk.

The Hispanic community, he added, doesn’t receive enough education on the harmful effects of sugary beverages. After all,

Ramos noted, the cultural and emotional connections between Hispanics and soda run deep.

“If you look at South America, I mean Coca-Cola’s everywhere. Coca-Cola’s like a cartel in Mexico. They provide jobs. They’re at all the soccer games. They’re at all sorts of events. I mean, they run stuff. And people will support them.”

Mexico is the [fourth-largest](#) consumer of soft drinks in the world. In the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, locals believe Coke has magical powers and use it in religious rites, according to [The Guardian](#). The country’s leading cause of death is diabetes.

“Now it’s just educating people,” Ramos said, “not on soda but what soda’s trying to do and what ... soda can do to you.” ■

## About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.