



THE JOURNEY HOME

• BY MICHELLE COOKE •

DR. JUDY GOFORTH PARKER, commissioner of health policy for the Chickasaw Nation Department of Health, has always had a passion for healthier living. She wears her Fitbit faithfully and enjoys the tracking applications it offers her. One day, it sent a notification to her cellphone congratulating her on walking a distance equivalent to the length of Italy, and in that moment, she realized she could have made a more meaningful journey. She could have walked back to the Chickasaw Homeland. Her Chickasaw ancestors had been removed from the Holly Springs, Mississippi, area in the mid-1800s, and she wanted to go there, to see where her family was from, and to experience a Homeland journey of her own.

On that day in 2015, she called Health Planning Senior Advisor Connie Merriman into her office and declared, “Connie, I’m walking home. ... I just got this notification that I walked 400 miles, so why don’t I just walk home, and why don’t we figure out a way that we can get Chickasaw citizens involved in walking home with me regardless of where they are?”

At first, her idea was simple. She envisioned keeping a spreadsheet and enlisting people to email every day and say how far they had walked.

“I literally thought I would put something in the Chickasaw Times, and we would tell people [to] count your steps and let’s see if we can log 400 miles of walking, but Connie said, ‘No, I think we can do it a little bit fancier than that,’ and so that’s what happened.” As they sat in Goforth Parker’s office, one creative idea lead to another, and the AYA: Your Fitness Journey app was born.

In its basic form, the one-of-a-kind step-tracking app is a fitness tracker – an interactive mobile walking app – but its uniqueness lies in its historical storyline. The app provides users with an enjoyable way to learn about Chickasaw history and culture while improving their health through increased physical activity.



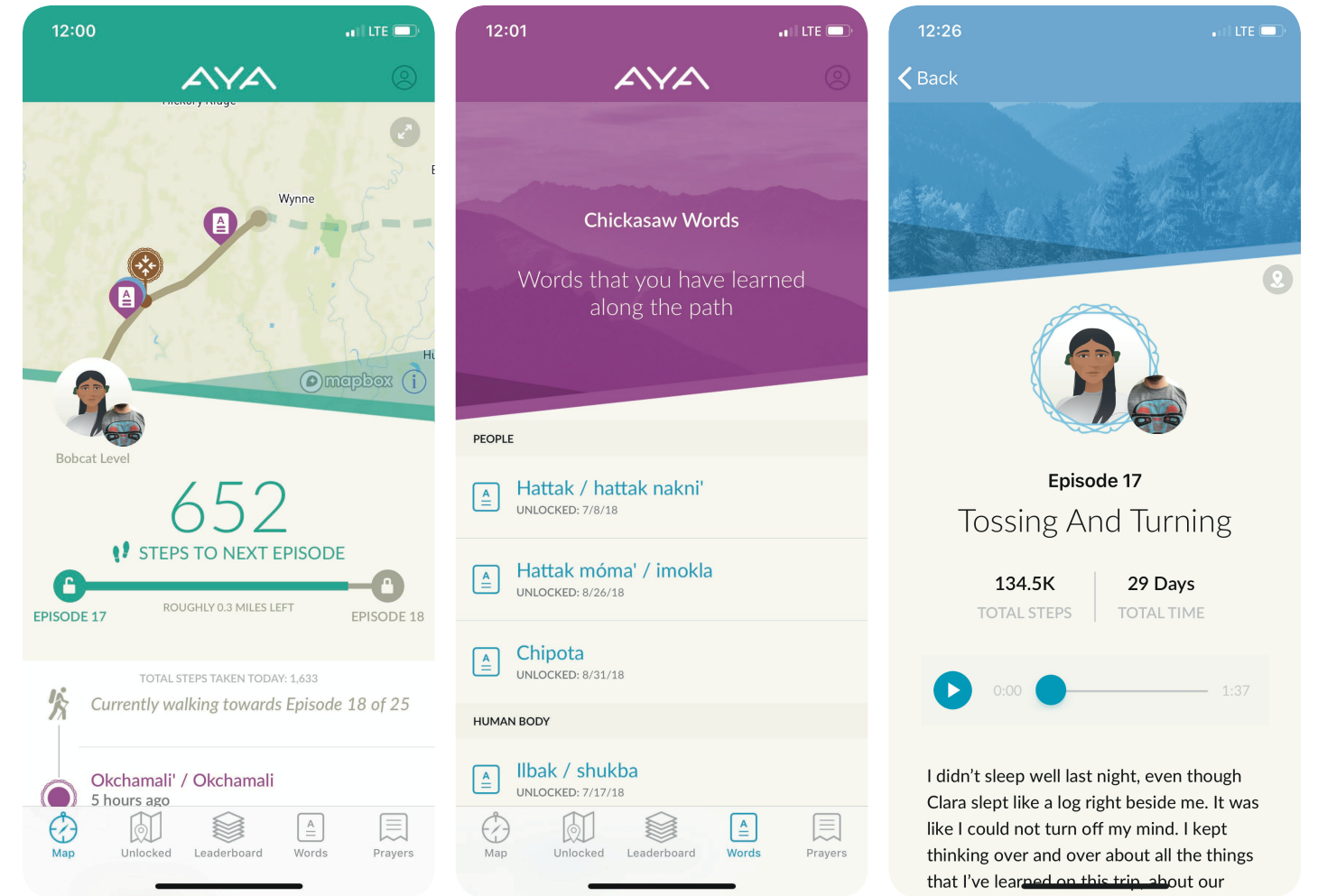


Merriman witnessed Goforth Parker's emotional reaction in that initial meeting, and she asked herself, what if they could create that kind of emotion in their walkers? She knew emotion was the element they needed to see some behavioral changes. They needed to create the feeling Goforth Parker experienced in that moment. She thought if they could recreate that moment for people to reconnect, to find out where they were from and to understand the culture they belonged to, then maybe they could prompt people to walk step-by-step to the Homeland.

"The culture and history piece was the lightbulb for us," Merriman said. "We know there are a lot of walking apps out there. But the lightbulb moment was that emotional connection with our history and culture. That's unique to us. It makes us different, and we have over 66,000 citizens that could relate to that. And like Judy said, if we can change the health of 66,000 citizens, we have changed the health of the Nation."

Goforth Parker and her team knew that turning these ideas into a tangible product would take an experienced app developer. They turned to Future Haus in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, for help. Future Haus is a Christian company known for creating apps like the YouVersion Bible App for Life.Church and the Sonic App for Sonic Drive-Ins. Although the team had several companies turn in proposals, Merriman said Future Haus was the only one who responded with, "We get what you're saying. To see behavior changed over a sustained time, there's got to be an emotional excitement wrapped around it."

Future Haus knew that branding was important to an app as well, because it tells people what's in a name; it gives the name of the app symbolism. Future Haus looked at the components of the AYA app in order to accomplish that. They defined the app's key components as adventure, challenge, transformation and health. A symbol for each was created. They researched Chickasaw words and found that aya meant "to go" or "to journey," and Merriman reached out to the Chickasaw language department for confirmation. The Chickasaw Language Committee agreed, and the name was approved. Then they combined parts of each drawing and made the AYA logo. The colors of the name also play a big part in branding. The colors in AYA's logo transition from red to green representing the red Oklahoma dirt to the lush green of our Homeland forests.



AS YOU WALK, YOU EARN

When it comes to health and fitness, it should be more than just going through the motions. AYA not only takes you on a journey to improved health, it unlocks a world of rich Chickasaw narratives.



CHARACTER EPISODES

Each character has 25 stories that you will unlock as you walk along your journey.



POINTS OF INTEREST

Unlock imagery and information about these historical locations anchored along the path.



CHICKASAW WORDS

You will see and hear Chickasaw words, as you learn more about the Chickasaw language.



CHICKASAW PRAYERS

Enrich your spirit and draw encouragement from prayers spoken by our fluent Chickasaw speakers.



AYA truly embraces the mission of the Chickasaw Nation, which is to “enhance the overall quality of life of the Chickasaw people.”





Cameron Mitchell records audio for the app as Eliza. A total of six people recorded including Vincent Baptiste (Hikatubby), Virginia Bolen (Akanowa), Monica Copeland (Mah Wah Ta), Ace Greenwood (Solomon), Cameron Mitchell (Eliza) and LaDonna Brown (Points of Interest) to produce over three hours of audio. Photo by Wyas Parker.

When users sign up for the free app, they are introduced to five fictional Chickasaw characters: Akanowa, Hikatubby, Mah Wah Ta, Solomon and Eliza. All five characters are from different time periods, and they are all related to one another. Akanowa is an elder from the mid-1500s, Hikatubby is a Chikasha warrior from the mid-1500s, Mah Wah Ta, age 29, and Solomon, age 32, are both from 1837, and 12-year-old Eliza is from 1907. Each character unveils a story or historical facts about their time period as the user walks their path—a path that equals 444 miles, or the distance from Tishomingo, Oklahoma, to Tupelo, Mississippi, in the Chickasaw Homeland.

But if storytelling isn't enough to keep the user engaged, AYA also includes badges that are awarded periodically as you walk. These are fun items such as Chickasaw words with audio recordings to teach and carry on our language, Chickasaw prayers to read and listen to for encouragement, and Choctaw hymns to audibly nurture your spirit. Tiffany Logsdon, a beta tester for the application, said that hearing our language spoken was

Wyas Parker, Connie Merriman, Dr. Judy Goforth Parker and Nicole Schultz share ideas at a creative planning meeting for AYA.



Photo by Wiley Barnes

deeply emotional for her. “I don’t know how many times I got goosebumps.”

Users follow their progress on a map as they come to points of interest on their journey that tell them about places our Chickasaw ancestors visited on their way to Indian Territory. All of the words, prayers, and points of interest are banked for the user to revisit any time they wish. The points of interest are accompanied by audio so the user can hear the text as well as read it.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) explains that walking is a great way to get the physical activity we need to obtain health benefits because it doesn’t require any special skills and doesn’t cost any money or require special equipment.

Physical activity like walking has also been shown to improve sleep quality and reduce mental health concerns like anxiety and depression.

AYA truly embraces the mission of the Chickasaw Nation, which is to “enhance the overall quality of life of the Chickasaw people.” Goforth Parker understood

by using an app, they would be able to reach Chickasaw citizens anywhere, and that was the goal. She explained that “Governor Anoatubby, for one, wanted to make sure that we were able to reach our citizens. If you really think about it, a person could be anywhere and be able to experience the walk.”

AYA fulfills the mission in two ways. With AYA, Chickasaw citizens will enhance not only their physical health, but also their historical knowledge of their culture. They will be walking their way to a healthier lifestyle, and as Goforth Parker said, “walking home.” When asked her opinion on AYA, Logsdon replied, “It’s a beautiful app. ... It blew my expectations out of the water. It would be great for everyone to have it, even if they think they know everything about the Chickasaw Nation.”

To learn more about the AYA app, visit AYAwalk.com. The free app is also available for download at the Apple App Store and Google Play.