

Grass

Innovative Food Education Programs Empower

Nutrition education is changing, plate by plate. It is happening around the country—on rooftop farms, at food tastings and demonstrations, farmers’ markets and community chef training classes. Increasingly, community food education programs offer nutrition and wellness learning through interactive and innovative approaches. By addressing the distinct needs and circumstances of their respective populations, these grassroots initiatives teach the skills to grow, select, prepare, and understand food from the ground up, allowing participants to actively redefine their health and move beyond the statistics and stigma that often narrowly define their experiences. This systematic programming provides layers of tangible tools and support to inspire significant change in the way participants view food and nutrition, and the budgeting of their food dollars. The timing of the surge couldn’t be more appropriate: as of 2010, according to Feeding America, 17.2 million American households were food-insecure, meaning they were uncertain where their next meals would come from—the highest number ever recorded in the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that 17 million American children—nearly one in four—have limited or uncertain access to affordable, nutritious food.



Rebecca Lemos and Lola Bloom began gardening with children at CentroNia, a community-based education center in the Columbia Heights area of Washington, D.C., while still in high school. Believing that all children and families should have access to natural spaces, the duo continued their work throughout college and post-graduation, and in 2003, City Blossoms was born. City Blossoms creates Community Green Spaces in low-income neighborhoods, offers workshops at schools and community organizations, and leads professional development trainings. “Our model uses the garden to teach artistic expression, healthy living skills,

eco-literacy, and community building,” Bloom says. Kids participate in botanical drawing; prepare summer rolls, salsa, pesto, and mixed salads using freshly harvested ingredients; and through an Herbal Entrepreneurship program, cultivate, harvest, and use herbs to create products to sell at farmers’ markets. “Food is a common language that can be used to create strong community bonds—and it’s way easier to attract people to healthy habits through cooking than through lectures,” says Bloom. “We try to meet people where they are, think about food more holistically, and approach people from their interests, rather than hammering them over the head with what ‘should’ be in their diets.” City Blossoms created

Roots

by Lee Erica Elder

Communities to Take Nutrition Into Their Own Hands

ten new school gardens in the last year, and counts children of program alumni among current participants.

Not far from City Blossoms is a national symbol of the growing movement for sustainability and healthy eating—the White House vegetable garden, which broke ground in 2009. First Lady Michelle Obama conceived of the all-organic garden—which also supplies food to local food banks and soup kitchens—when she felt her own daughters’ meals were not nutritious enough. For many D.C.-area children, the need for healthy food is dire—the area has the highest national rate (32.3%) of children in households without consistent access to food, according to Feeding America. According to D.C. Hunger Solutions, 43% of all D.C. school-age children are obese or overweight, 81% of children do not consume the USDA-recommended five fruits and vegetables a day, and estimated annual health care costs associated with obesity in D.C. are \$372 million and rising. The White House Garden, Obama’s “Let’s Move!” campaign, and D.C.’s 2010 Healthy

Left: The Brooklyn Grange rooftop farm serves as an incubator of knowledge for the children in the City Growers education program as they examine insects and plants that they have never encountered.

Right: Garden on the Go of Indianapolis brings fresh and affordable produce to people who live in areas where fruits and vegetables are not easily accessible. Half of their stops serve seniors who are physically unable to travel and cannot afford produce in grocery stores.

Schools Act—efforts sharing a focus on wellness education for children through a variety of means—bring national attention to the need for a re-imagining of the nutrition landscape.

In New York City, a unique nonprofit educational program, City Growers, thrives in an unconventional space at Brooklyn Grange, a one-acre rooftop farm in Long Island City. “Because ground-level space in the inner city is so limited and expensive, rooftop farms present a viable option for city farm and community garden projects,” says Gwen Schantz, co-founder. Visiting

students, many from Title I schools (those with a high percentage of students from low-income families), explore farming, gardening, and their role in the environment. The experience is illuminating. “Kids are a little more connected to junk food that they eat than they are to vegetables and fruits,” says co-founder Anastasia Plakias. “They’re able to connect with junk food products on a brand level—there’s a face for McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken—these are iconic brand representations. For many kids, pulling a carrot out of the ground is a brand-new experience. When they feel that carrot in their hands, feel the dirt give way underneath, then taste that really sweet fresh vegetable, it’s an eye-opener.” Plakias acknowledges that even among those who can afford to regularly buy



healthy produce, a real appreciation of where food comes from “is sorely lacking in our community.” She hopes this hands-on experience inspires informed and independent eating choices. “It’s so important to connect kids with food at this stage of their lives because they are growing and their bodies are changing, and they are really curious about that. Kids are all about having a tactile and visceral understanding of the world around them, and you can only impart so much information intellectually—they need to connect with the subject matter.” She shares a comment from a letter written by a visitor from Upward Bound, a college-prep program for students from low-income families: “I learned a lot, such that it is good to buy food locally, and that these rooftop farms help the economy of the community by giving people jobs, and there are little to no greenhouse gases or fossil fuels used.”

When nutritionist and chef Gina Keatley, founder of Nourishing NYC, lived in East Harlem while attending New York University, she was shaken by the grave income disparities between her neighborhood and those just a few miles further downtown. East Harlem has some of the highest rates of hunger and obesity in the city, and according to the U.S. Census, 34% of

residents claim disability (the national average is 19%). “Seeing men and women in their early 30s and even younger, missing limbs or living their lives in wheelchairs or with walkers, I realized quickly that their mobility and health issues were directly related to complications from diabetes and obesity,” Keatley says. “Living in a food desert, it seemed obvious: poverty was directly linked to the ability to access healthy and nutritious sources of foods. I immediately knew that I had to do something to address the direct correlation between health and low-income status.” The immediacy was intensely personal; Keatley experienced poverty and homelessness as a child. Nourishing NYC’s Urban Produce Program distributes thousands of pounds of fresh produce annually to New York City residents, and provides community education through its junior chef program and nutrition classes. “Through Nourishing NYC’s nutrition, health, and anti-hunger advocacy programs, we begin to approach people on a human level, where we are learning and growing together to strengthen families and communities,” Keatley says. “Giving people the tools to make their own healthy foods at home, showing them through demos and cooking classes, as well as letting them taste and smell the ingredients as they interact with one another, works wonders.”

Critical Stats Linking Nutrition and Obesity in Children and Adults

National Center on Family Homelessness:

- Children experiencing homelessness are sick four times more often than other children.
- They go hungry at twice the rate of other children.
- Nutritional deficiencies in homeless children often lead to increased rates of being overweight and obese.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- There are much higher rates of obesity observed at every age of children experiencing homelessness than in other populations.
- About one-third of U.S. adults (33.8%) are obese.
- Approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents aged 2–19 years are obese.
- Since 1980, obesity prevalence among children and adolescents has almost tripled.
- There are significant racial and ethnic disparities in obesity prevalence among U.S. children and

adolescents. In 2007–08, Hispanic boys aged 2–19 years were significantly more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic white boys, and non-Hispanic black girls were significantly more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic white girls.

- Obese children are more likely to have high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD). In one study, 70% of obese children had at least one CVD risk factor, and 39% had two or more.
- Obese children are at greater risk of social and psychological problems, such as discrimination and poor self-esteem, which can continue into adulthood.

Children’s Health Fund:

- Obese children may show other signs of poor nutrition, including iron deficiency and anemia.
- For low-income children, obesity may be associated with household food insecurity.



Above: This vibrant mural by Max Bode helps children understand the stages of composting, which they can also witness firsthand on the Brooklyn Grange rooftop farm.

Below: The Chinese American Planning Council's Youth Green Team receives hands-on learning experiences at the Brooklyn Grange to accompany their studies on urban agriculture.

Keatley has been honored as a CNN Hero and a L'Oréal Paris Woman of Worth, but perhaps some of her most rewarding acknowledgements are the junior chefs who look up to her, like 13-year-old Hinda Diakite. "It was a wonderful experience," she says, of the weekend cooking classes, community service projects, and especially a Thanksgiving meal workshop. "I plan to continue working with Nourishing NYC. Community food education programs are important, because they educate people on the right things to eat and how to live a happy and healthy lifestyle. My goals are to get into Food and Finance High School, and then attend culinary school. I hope to open my own restaurant or bakery one day." Nourishing NYC recently launched Nourishing USA, creating Anti-Hunger Advocacy Kits for people around the country who want to start their own self-sustaining community gardens and initiatives.

Targeting preparation of the family meal, many programs encourage the integration of healthy cooking skills into existing traditions. Just Food,



a New York City-based organization, which has supported community-sustained agriculture programs, community-run farmers' markets, and farm-to-food pantry programs since 1995, began community food education programs to close the gap between access to local and organic food, and consumption. "Research shows that it's not just an issue of access—access doesn't mean you are going to make the right choices," says Angela Davis, Just Food community food education program coordinator. To address these needs, the organization works within the local framework to create a space for engagement, training community chefs and gardeners to conduct workshops and demonstrations in their communities. "Our goal is to see what is already happening in the community and providing the training to amplify what they're already doing," says Davis. "It's about planting a seed with people, getting them used to things they hadn't heard of before or cooking things in a different way." The task of encouraging lifestyle changes is a marathon, not a sprint, and community chefs are tasked with keeping people interested in preparing their own food on a regular basis. "Many people see cooking as a burden," says Davis. "We compete against fast food and things like the 99 cents menu, which are

cheap and don't require any effort. To be healthy, to eat well and deal with issues of chronic diseases and take charge of your own health, doesn't mean every meal has to be from scratch, but the majority should, because you can't control what's in your food when eating out. Our trainers pick ingredients that are affordable, which is definitely a challenge. We always have a recipe that they can try at home." Participants enjoy the innovative demonstrations (a popular session teaches moms to make their own baby food) and the community chefs have even developed their own followings.

Loss of control over meal preparation can be devastating for those living in shelters. To address this need, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Homeless Health Initiative (HHI) implemented a nutrition education and fitness promotion program supported by hundreds of volunteers, including doctors, nurses, and social workers, at three local shelters. Operation CHOICES is now in its third year of operation. "When we conducted focus groups with moms, they shared very strong emotions around food," says Social Work Trainer Melissa Berrios. "They can no longer provide nourishment for their children—the love that moms pour into preparing a meal for their family, knowing exactly what their children like and don't like to eat, delighting in the smiles and satisfaction on their faces when full from mama's specialty."

Weekly Operation CHOICES sessions with moms include fitness activities and interactive nutrition education, including lessons on basic food groups, nutrition labels, serving sizes, vitamins, minerals, and health consequences of obesity. The children's nutrition curriculum covers creating healthy, balanced plates and the importance of fruits and vegetables. "It is important that we don't label foods as good vs. bad—instead, we discuss how to make healthier choices and the importance of eating certain foods in moderation," says Berrios. "We recognize that our families have limited resources and we don't want them to feel like failures because they can't easily access or afford fresh, organic produce on their way to the shelter from school. We want them to experience the power of successfully picking out snacks from the corner store that have less sugar or salt than what they may have chosen before. One mom shared with us that her son is now cutting off the fat on his meat at dinner in the shelter. One of our shelter partners offers a food tasting to families before deciding to add the new item to the menu."

Left: A thankful family leaves the Garden on the Go stand in Indianapolis with bags of fresh produce. Garden on the Go offers produce that is of higher quality than what is found in local grocery stores, so it stays fresh for a longer period of time, enabling families to maximize the money they spend on food.

Opposite: Nourishing NYC distributes thousands of pounds of free produce to New York City residents who otherwise would not be able to afford nutritious fruits and vegetables.





The program also preps parents for moves into transitional and permanent housing, accompanying them to local grocery stores to practice reading labels to make healthier choices and shopping the perimeter of the store for fresher options. “Operation CHOICES empowers those living in shelter and experiencing feelings of hopelessness, to recognize opportunities to gain control over their lives by making choices to improve their health,” says Berrios.

Indiana has the 15th-highest obesity rate in the nation, but in just under a year, a groundbreaking partnership between Indiana University Health and the Green Bean Delivery Program has created hope for significant change. The first of its kind between health-care and nonprofit organizations, Garden on the Go brings fresh, healthy, and affordable produce into food deserts in the Marion County area. “In our community, only about 25% of residents consume produce on a regular basis—that’s just not enough,” says Lisa Cole, manager of Indianapolis community outreach for Indiana University Health. The program launched in May of 2011, and results are already impressive—7,300 point-of-sales transactions in seven months. “It’s a regular route, Wednesday–Saturday, 16 stops per week. Ninety percent of participants say it has increased the amount of produce they eat,” says Cole. “Prior to Garden on the Go, one of our customers, a 44-year woman, both diabetic and a double amputee, was maybe able to get produce on a monthly basis. Now she can access produce on a weekly basis.” Says Lincoln Saunders, director of Garden on the Go, “If you’re in a motorized scooter or wheelchair, the grocery store that is two blocks away might as well be two miles away.” With half of the stops serving seniors, Garden on the Go’s efforts have

already caught the attention of the Partnership on Aging. “Senior hunger is a huge issue,” says Cole.

Garden on the Go’s produce is beautiful and affordable. “This is very different from what they might find at a convenience store or box store,” says Cole. “The quality is so high that customers can maximize their food dollars better because it lasts longer.” The program was advised to charge for produce to connect customers with the solutions to their health issues and the importance of budgeting food dollars. At press time, about \$4.95 bought a pound of green beans, a pound of bananas, three pounds of potatoes, a couple of apples, and a head of lettuce—this number was closer to \$7.00 at the start of the program. Customers stock up on green peppers, priced at just 40 cents each, stretching them to create family- and budget-friendly meals such as stuffed peppers. “We think about what we carry on the truck as a great opportunity to deal with chronic health issues that we are trying to prevent or cope with,” says Saunders. “One gentleman said it was the best-looking produce since his own farm he grew up on as a child.”

Community food education programs are growing in number, as a critical response to unprecedented rates of poverty, obesity, malnutrition, and chronic disease in the United States. These movements bring much-needed attention to issues of homelessness and poverty, offer the possibility for increased health and longevity, and may even move people out of generational poverty. If programs continue to address the variety of issues created by food insecurity, and place the power of natural health in the hands of communities, change is possible. “I think these programs have the power to create changes in partnership with policy changes across the country related to food economics, community health, school foods, and urban agriculture,” says Bloom.

Corporate and media attention to these issues is at an all-time high. In 2011, Sesame Street got in on the act, with a Walmart-sponsored special, Growing Hope Against Hunger, introducing an impoverished puppet, Lily, whose family struggles with food insecurity.

“More not-for-profits should look for corporate entities to partner with,” says Cole. “If everybody can bring something to the table, that’s reasonable and sustainable over time. You have to have these efforts crossing over each other,” she says. “We have a responsibility to deal with the health of our community. The time is right for this kind of thing. Resistance that we’ve seen is, ‘What kind of data can you share with us?’ You don’t see changes overnight, but if you wait, how many trucks could have been started? This is a national problem, and it’s a complicated problem. To see the faces of these individuals that come off a truck with fresh produce loaded in their bags in a way they haven’t been able to before, I can’t translate that into data—but, if we come every week, it is going to make a difference.” ■