



COMMUNITY POWER

By Michelle Mascarenhas

(with excerpts and photographs from Weaving the Food Web by Jered Lawson and the Community Food Security Coalition)

CHANCES ARE THAT YOU PROBABLY know someone who has high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes. Diet is a major contributing factor in these and many other diseases. Low-income communities, especially Latino, African-American, and Native American, suffer disproportionately from high rates of diet-related diseases.

For years, some experts held that obesity and diet-related illnesses were on the rise because people were choosing the wrong foods. But in many communities of color, healthy and appealing foods are not widely available while fast food and junk food abound. How can people make healthy choices when the choices are not there?

While you would be hard pressed to find a full-service health food store in a low-income neighborhood in America, you might be surprised at how difficult it is even to find a supermarket. Dr. Kimberly Morland, co-author of a recent University of North Carolina study found that five times more supermarkets were located in neighborhoods where white respondents lived compared to neighborhoods where black respondents lived.

Access impacts what people eat. “On average, the more supermarkets there were in a given area, the more likely residents were to meet dietary recommendations for fruits and vegetables,” said Morland.

The good news is that people in these communities are coming together to change the statistics. They are planting gardens, starting farmers’ markets, teaching and taking cooking classes, organizing to stop the sale of soda and junk food in their

schools, and getting salad bars into their cafeterias. They are recruiting family-owned supermarkets to locate in low-income neighborhoods that the chains have moved out of and asking local stores to stock more fresh fruits and vegetables. Their efforts are critical to reducing health problems like diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, and high blood pressure.

In the process, they’re also building grassroots leadership and community power.

FARM FRESH CHOICE: AWAKENING URBAN TASTE BUDS TO HEALTHY LOCAL FOOD

For co-founder Joy Moore, Farm Fresh Choice was a way to do something for her grandson. “His odds of coming up healthy are stacked against him,” says Moore, who is African-American, lives in south Berke-



ley, and until recently subsisted on a typical urban diet of fast, highly processed foods. “I realized I didn’t eat fresh fruits and vegetables. For years I went to the store and bought a piece of fruit and it just didn’t taste good. No flavor. I turned off from it. Then one day I was given this nectarine from a farmer of Good Humus Produce in Yolo County, and I said, ‘Oh, my god!’ . . . the flavor bursting in my mouth. I’ve never been the same since. I was reminded of what good food could taste like. Simple pleasure.”

Once a week, when parents come to pick up their children at one of three after-school programs in low-income communities in west and south Berkeley, they can head home with a bag full of farm fresh produce selected to their family’s tastes.

Produce is purchased from farmers in bulk at the nearby Berkeley Farmers’ Market and delivered to the after-school programs. There, members can purchase \$7 worth of fresh produce at cost. Outreach workers coordinate distribution at each site and participate in weekly nutrition education training so that they can provide nutrition information at the sites.

According to co-coordinator Anushka Baltes, the program “exposes people to the idea that fresh fruits and vegetables are good for them, it makes fruits and vegetables more visible and accessible, and it gives people a chance to learn about nutrition and health.”

Between Farm Fresh Choice and the farmers’ market, the Tuesday trip to Berkeley makes good economic sense for AMO Organics, the Hollister cooperative whose members are former waged farm laborers. “We earn more from coming to Berkeley than if we were to sell to a wholesale company,” says Maria Inés Catalán, one of the cooperative farmers. “The pay is just. We also like getting to know the people who eat the food.”

Along with several other groups working to improve food access in their communities, Farm Fresh Choice is organizing a food and justice youth camp for twenty young people from communities of color in Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco. They will visit farms, participate in cooking classes, share meals prepared from farm-fresh foods, and discuss the issues that their communities face.

“We have to get the youth involved in order to make change,” says Anushka Baltes. “If kids get paid in a job where they

are actually learning something worthwhile, it does a lot for their development.” With this in mind, Farm Fresh Choice is working to create a peer-based nutrition education program with paid internships.

“We have a long way to go,” says Moore. “But if we incorporate in our daily lives bits and pieces of this more simple way of life, we are on the path to a healthier community, physically and spiritually.”

ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE: SALAD BARS AND SODA BANS

The Los Angeles Unified School District serves over 700,000 meals each school day. Since about 70 percent of students enrolled are eligible for free or reduced price meals, the food provided can be an essential source of health and nutrition for growing kids. Yet a survey conducted by the UCLA School of Public Health in 1999 found that about half of the students in low-income schools, most of whom were Latino or African-American, were overweight or obese.

The Center for Food and Justice partnered with the school district to pilot Farmers’ Market Salad Bars in two schools. Instead of opting for hamburgers and fries, students began to line up to select from an array of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Students participated in promoting the new salad bars to their fellow students, went on farm field trips, and rediscovered the school garden. “The salad bar is the greatest thing that could happen to the 59th Street School’s cafeteria,” wrote Diana Garcia in a letter to school district officials. “It helps me stay healthy and have a better life.”



After a year, the UCLA researchers went back to the schools that had piloted the salad bars. They found that fruit and vegetable consumption had gone up while consumption of fat, calories, and cholesterol had gone down.

Since then, the district has put salad bars in over 40 schools. The salad bars are now stocked with produce purchased from the wholesale market rather than purchased direct from local farms. Without much awareness of the need to support local family farms, there has been little protest.

Still, the positive movement towards healthier and more appealing food in the cafeteria inspired parents, teachers, and youth to come together and work on other pressing issues. Brought together by the Center for Food and Justice, the Healthy School Food Coalition was formed in the spring of 2001.

In summer of 2002, when two board members proposed a resolution to ban soda sales from school campuses, the group quickly stepped into action.

Parent and community activist Neelam Sharma says, “Healthy School Food Coalition members and other nutrition advocates



met with board members Canter and Hudley-Hayes to strengthen the soda ban resolution and develop a strategy for gaining community and board support for its passage. We also launched a letter-writing and phone campaign targeting all board members.”

Raul Hernandez, a high school student at Bravo Medical Magnet, says he testified in support of the board resolution because he had become concerned about the health effects of drinking too much soda. Though

Use on **Vegetable crops**
* Lettuce * Spinach * Broccoli * Cauliflower
* Cabbage * Potatoe * Cucurbit * Legume etc.

Agroneem

Broad Spectrum
Organic Insecticide & Nematicide

Controls: Aphids, White flies, Fruit flies, Leaf miners, Loopers, Worms, Moths, Thrips, Weevils, Beetles, Rsyllids, Caterpillars, Grasshoppers, Mites, Ants, Maggots, Nematodes and more

Safe on Beneficials



 **Agro Logistic Systems Inc.**
It is our business to protect your eco-system

1-800-425-3388 www.agrologistic.com

he says he still drinks a soda now and then, he asked, "How can we choose something else when there isn't anything but soda or fountain water available?"

With the boardroom packed with parents, teachers, students, and nutrition advocates, the board voted almost unanimously to pass the resolution to ban the sale of sodas and other unhealthy beverages on school campuses.

Francesca de la Rosa, organizing director at the Center for Food and Justice, says that the passage of the soda ban was due in part to the months of informing and organizing that preceded the vote. Workshops were held on school food policy, nutrition, and advocacy.

At a community forum held after the soda ban passed, LAUSD board member Hudley-Hayes said, "If the community had not been organized, this resolution would not have passed."

Getting rid of junk food will help to make way for healthier options like juices and salad bars. And through organizing and educating, community members begin to learn about the benefits of supporting family farms and choosing organic.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Across the country, in small and big ways, communities are taking back their food systems to put health, people, and the environment first. In California, a number of groups have formed a network to advocate for policies that promote health and justice in the food system.

Through the Community Food Security Coalition, they have published a new guidebook describing projects like these and the types of policies that can support such efforts. Copies will be sent to all elected officials in the state capitol. But it will take the phone calls and meetings of thousands of constituents to convince policy makers that these issues are important. Join us!

- Email cfsc@foodsecurity.org to request a copy of the new guidebook to send to your local or national elected official with a personalized letter.
- Meet with your state elected officials to educate them on the need for access to healthy food, especially in low-income communities.
- Join the Community Food Security Coalition to organize with other concerned individuals and groups. 🐾

For More Information

Community Food Security Coalition: cfsc@foodsecurity.org
or call (310) 822-5410

Farm to School: Center for Food & Justice (323) 341-5095

Farm Fresh Choice: (510) 848-1704

The author can be contacted at:

Michelle Mascarenhas, Food and Society Policy Fellow

1531 Fulton Street • San Francisco, California 94117

Ph: (415) 929-8867 • e-mail: mlm@sonic.net

web: www.foodandsocietyfellows.org

Food and Society Policy: A program of the Thomas Jefferson Agricultural Institute in partnership with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.



FARMING *for the* FUTURE



from our

WHOLESOME FARM TO YOUR TABLE

GUIDED BY AN EVER-GROWING RESPECT FOR THE LAND, LUNDBERG FAMILY FARMS MEETS THE CHALLENGES OF FARMING WITH INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS DESIGNED TO WORK IN BALANCE WITH NATURE. THEIR INNOVATIVE WAYS MAINTAIN FERTILE SOIL AND GROW VIGOROUS CROPS OF EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY RICE. WELL AHEAD OF THEIR TIME, THE LUNDBERG FAMILY PIONEERED METHODS OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE THAT ARE FOLLOWED TO THIS DAY. THE FAMILY'S BOUNTIFUL HISTORY NOW SPANS FOUR GENERATIONS. OVER THE DECADES THEY HAVE CULTIVATED THE UNIFYING GOAL OF PROVIDING THE MOST DELICIOUS AND CAREFULLY GROWN RICE IN THE WORLD.

All our Organic Products are CCOF Certified



PO Box 869, RICHVALE, CA 95974-0869
PHONE 530 /882 .4551 • FAX 530 /882 .4500
WEBSITE WWW.LUNDBERG.COM