

Eating Healthy is Kids' Stuff at the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County

Stephanie Catlett, Catalyst Editor

A group of preschool age children parades through New Pioneer Food Co-op in Coralville, their matching red t-shirts and infectious good cheer radiating through the aisles, drawing affectionate waves from staff and customers alike. These food-savvy children sample a selection of dates, tofu salad, and Swiss cheese with gusto, crowding around trays and raising their hands for seconds. From what far flung region do these food adventurers hail?

They come from neighborhoods in your very own community; underprivileged neighborhoods that are getting a boost from a great new program at the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County (NCJC). Touring New Pioneer is just one of the ways that NCJC is getting children up close and personal with their food. An innovative new health and nutrition program for both children and adults is teaching area residents that living on a budget does not have to mean sacrificing home-made, healthful meals for fattening fast food fare. If a lunch menu of cranberry-orange glazed salmon, snow peas stir fried with peppers and rice, and fresh fruit sounds like something you might order at a gourmet restaurant, think again.

So, what are the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County anyway? NCJC is a human services agency meeting the needs of Johnson County through its centers in both Iowa City and Tiffin. Over 200 children and up to 100 adults per day utilize the Centers for their childhood development programs, which include infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms, and after school programs for school age children and teens. NCJC emphasizes adult education through parent support programs, English language learner classes, and family literacy programs, just to name a few of the many opportunities offered.



I met with Diane Dingbaum, Associate Director, and Sue Freeman, Program Director to discuss NCJC's new health initiatives. Through a partnership with the Kohl's Health and Wellness Program and the University of Iowa Children's Hospital, NCJC gained access to necessary funding to create a food and exercise program to both educate and motivate the community.

This funding allowed NCJC to hire former New Pi Chef Elizabeth Weinberg to contribute her experience, ingenuity, and a variety of new menu items to the Centers. With an emphasis on healthier menus and healthier lifestyles, Liz's main goal was "to move away from processed foods, and move toward food that is made from scratch." Chef Weinberg has now eliminated most canned fruits and vegetables from the menu, and she aspires to getting at least four of the five recommended servings of fruits and/or vegetables into the breakfasts, lunches, and snacks that she serves each day.

Menu changes came incrementally at first, with Liz carefully attempting to make changes to pre-existing meals by substituting whole wheat pasta for white pasta and real cheese for Velveeta®. Eventually, the Centers' entire menu was revamped, and it now includes items like chicken salad wraps and West Indian beans and coconut rice. Subsidized through the USDA's Free & Reduced Lunch Program, Liz has introduced fresh veggies, fruit, and a new, lower fat, ranch dip into the Centers' diets for under two dollars per person per day.

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Kids' Stuff

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"We feel proud of what everybody's eating," explains Diane Dingbaum, "and the other really important thing that happened for us is that we're all talking about why. There's lots of conversation in the classroom everyday about what we are eating and why." Children participate in snack preparation at the Centers, and each classroom is responsible for preparing a snack for the entire building each day. By involving these kids in food preparation, the Centers establish a relationship between the children and their food that will encourage healthy lifelong eating habits and teach them useful food preparation skills.

Another aspect of NCJC's focus on wellness is the pedometers visible on every member of the NCJC community, from children to parents to staff members. There is a Walking Club that meets every week. In the beginning, nineteen adults in the program did not own walking shoes, but NCJC was able to assist all nineteen in procuring shoes so that they could participate. Children from kindergarten through fourth grade are using their pedometers to map a "Walk Across Iowa" in which the children chart their steps on posters to see how far across the state they have exercised.

By combining the pedometers with the menu changes at the Centers, a causal relationship between eating and exercise

becomes apparent. Choices must be made, and the discussion of the results of poor eating habits can naturally lead to better ones. When pondering whether or not to consume a bag of Flaming Hot Cheetos®, a teen realizes that he will need to take 2,000 more steps that day just to break even. Sue Freeman elaborates, "We do have a choice here. You can have your spaghetti with an inch of cheese on top, but know that there is a trade-off."

As a result of changes made by Liz and the staff at NCJC, every day there are beautiful plates of food being offered to patrons of the Centers. Vibrant yellow rice is paired with fiery red beans, French toast casserole made with hearty New Pioneer bread glistens with succulent berries and fresh ricotta cheese (we've got the recipe!). Families receive items from Table to Table, and recipes are provided for unfamiliar items. Here, it's all about empowerment and making the best out of what you are



Liz and the kids sample a variety of food during their store tour. This stuff's really finger linkin' good!

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Education Coordinator Theresa Carbrey (left) talks about all the parts of plants we can eat with NCJC students and NCJC staff. (Below right) Is fruit a natural dessert? Students sample Medjool dates.

given. The Centers' administrative assistant pipes in, "I had an eight-year old cheering for hummus the other day" she declares. Now that's progress!

Thomas Carlyle once said, "He who has health, has hope. And he who has hope, has everything." At the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County, the idea of giving community residents

hope through better health is building momentum. The staff and volunteers of NCJC are local heroes and their efforts to educate the underprivileged communities they serve deserve the highest of praise. The lessons they are providing will extend far into the future, setting these community members up for success for life! 🐾

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– Thomas Carlyle

FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

Ingredients:

- 12 slices sourdough bread
- 1–15 oz. container ricotta cheese
- 1–10 oz. package frozen mixed berries
- 8 eggs
- 2 c. milk
- 1/3 c. maple syrup
- 1/3 c. sugar
- 1 t. cinnamon
- 1 t. nutmeg

Directions:

Butter a 9x13x2 inch baking pan. Cut the bread into pieces to cover the bottom of the pan.

Mix the ricotta cheese with the sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla. Spread the ricotta mixture over the bread slices.

Top with frozen berries and a second layer of bread slices.

Beat the eggs with the milk and maple syrup. Mix well.

Pour egg mixture over bread, cheese, and berries. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Bake covered at 350° for 30 minutes. Uncover and bake for an additional 25 minutes or until golden brown.



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