

## **Extra News**

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### **An Oasis in Chicago's Food Deserts**

#### **Food activist Gary Cuneen cultivates nutritional awareness in urban middle schools**

"What does your family like to have for dinner?" asks Melissa Tobias, an instructor for Fresh from the Farm's summer program at Ames Middle School in Logan Square. Without hesitation, the teens' answers ranged from Popeye's to McDonald's to pizza.

An estimated 633,000 Chicagoans live in "food deserts," a term experts give to a densely populated area with limited access to grocery stores and healthy food options. Residents in these areas have to travel nearly twice as far to get to a grocery store than to a fast food restaurant. Lack of fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables in urban neighborhoods has been linked to high rates of childhood obesity and diabetes in low-income families.

Fresh from the Farm, a farm-to-school program administered by Seven Generations Ahead (SGA), is combating this trend by introducing urban kids to gardening, farming, ecology and nutritious food choices. Fresh from the Farm recently wrapped a seven-week summer program at Ames Middle School in Logan Square. The kids met three times a week for hands-on instruction.

Founded in 2001, SGA strives to find local solutions to global environmental problems. SGA's Fresh from the Farm program is a resource for school districts looking to incorporate nutrition curriculums, healthier lunches and locally raised food into school menu offerings.

"In a community starving for healthier food choices, our goal is to teach students to value the importance of food and how it affects our bodies, and to motivate them to make healthy lifestyle choices in their daily lives," says Gary Cuneen, food activist and founder of Oak Park-based SGA. "The Fresh from the Farm lessons give students the tools they need to plan and prepare well-balanced meals and snacks, regardless of where they live."

Five gallon buckets, colorfully painted by the students, serve as an urban garden in the Ames courtyard. Basil, tomatoes, parsley, peppers and peas are just a few of the fresh herbs and vegetables budding outside the classroom.

"Even in a food desert, finding organic, healthy food options can be as convenient as your own back yard. That's the point we are trying to make with the bucket gardens," says Melissa Tobias, a Fresh from the Farm instructor. "The students really enjoy planting, tending and cultivating their plants each week. And in the process they learn valuable life skills. And of course, the kids' favorite part – tasting the food they grow themselves."

As an alternative to the golden arches and fatty snacks, simple cooking lessons were also on the summer curriculum. In a recent classroom session, the kids made an easy twist on a gourmet caprese salad, using toothpicks, mozzarella, cherry tomatoes and basil leaves picked straight from the bucket garden outside. Tentative at first, the kids were surprised to find their skewered salad both fun and delicious. They even went back for seconds. What was for dessert? Smoothies. Made with just four simple ingredients, including fresh fruits, the sweet treat was a hit.

"Our food-mapping lesson was a real eye-opener," Tobias adds. "The class used Google

Maps to search for restaurants and grocery stores near the students' addresses. What we found were fast food chains on practically every corner, but a lack of nearby produce markets. Families tend to shop where it is convenient and affordable. Fresh from the Farm is working to fill the knowledge gap for urban families on the role of agriculture and nutrition in a healthy lifestyle, and to offer simple alternatives."

Fresh from the Farm will likely be back in the classroom this fall at Ames and at McAuliffe Elementary and McCormick Elementary, in Logan Square and Little Village, respectively.

*For more information about Fresh from the Farm, contact Gary Cuneen at (708) 660-9909 (708) 660-9909 .*