

Healthy and local food: filling a tall order

By R.A. Schuetz



Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Bill Jeffries, the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Stepping Stones Museum for Children discusses raising money for a Norwalk Foodshed initiative Wednesday, April 18, 2018, at the museum in Norwalk, Conn. ... more

NORWALK — In the brightly colored Healthyville Cafe at Stepping Stones Museum, Director of Strategic Initiatives Bill Jeffries looked up at the museum’s spring menu. Among the options were a turkey caprese salad and a green goddess salad with all natural grilled chicken, both advertised for \$8.75.

“We’ve been wanting to redesign the cafe for a while into an immersive space,

where you're actually learning about health and nutrition as you're eating inside of it," Jeffries said. "But in order to do that, we had to actually use locally sourced, healthy, organic food, and the more we got into it, we realized it's near impossible to do that affordably."

He said that many local farms are already at their limits. And finding locally sourced produce only becomes more difficult in the winter seasons, when nothing grows outdoors. The options the museum found for local, organic food were cost prohibitive.

"The prices become double and triple, and we don't want to do that," Jeffries said.

Instead, the museum settled for using some frozen products in order to save costs; that day, a father shared fries with his little boy and two families nearby sat down with salad and snacks they had brought from home.

More Information

Hunger in Connecticut

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the percentage of households in Connecticut that has had meals reduced or disrupted at least once a year due to a lack of resources has been growing.

2008-2010: 4.8 percent

2011-2013: 5.0 percent

2014-2016 6.4 percent

The tensions between making healthy food local, affordable and accessible are clear. Recently released data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows that the percentage of households in Connecticut that have reduced or disrupted their meals due to a lack of resources has been growing. Between

2008 and 2010, fewer than one out of 20 families in Connecticut had that experience every year; between 2014 and 2016, that number had raised to one out of every 16.

Creative solutions

And so, countless organizations in the city, from grocery stores to food pantries and from schools to museums are working to bring fresh, healthy foods to Norwalkers — a process requiring creativity and a facility for logistics.

Donna Benz tries to keep Bucciarelli Farm's produce affordable by eliminating the middle man as much as possible.

“As far as prices go, if they're buying from someone else, of course the prices will go up,” she said. “We grow, we sell on the same property.”

More and more organizations have begun imitate that practice at a smaller scale with gardens of their own.

It takes about one week to grow a fresh batch of microgreens at Harbor Harvest in East Norwalk. The grocery store keeps a water-controlled cultivator running year round, its shelves filled with bins labeled “wheat sprout,” “maple fenugreek,” “kale/red cabbage” and “cilantro.”

In the back, two beehives produce 80 pounds of honey a year, and planters currently filled with daffodils will soon be filled with tomatoes. The grocery store aims to sell as much locally produced items as it can, and its owner, Bob Kunkel, is currently undertaking an ambitious project to build a zero-emission lithium-battery catamaran (“We charge just like a Tesla”) to transport that food across the Sound.

The key to keeping fresh food as affordable as possible, Kunkel explained, was reducing waste.

“I have to sell produce within days,” he said. “If we don’t sell it by the end of the two or three days, then we cook it.”

The store has an array of homemade salads and an all-you-can-eat dinner bar.

Reducing waste is also key for how food pantries at Person-to-Person are able to offer their clients fresh food.

“Take whatever you want!” a volunteer at the Norwalk pantry urged Stacey as she walked through the aisles with a shopping cart.

Stacey looked over the produce (“Green peppers — I never thought I’d get green peppers here”) and began brainstorming recipes.

In the back of the pantry, other volunteers unloaded 50-pound bags of rutabagas and cabbage. Site Manager Susan Zelman explained that the produce was from the Connecticut Food Bank, which has partnerships with retailers including Costco and Walmart. When stores realize they have more food than they can sell or pull imperfect fruits from their shelves, Person-to-Person and the food bank welcome them with open arms.

It sometimes results in an oddball display. “It’s so funny — so much is either mammoth or minuscule,” Zelman said, looking over apples the sizes of golf balls and fists. “The groceries want only perfect-sized produce.” On another shelf perched a shipment of tiny spaghetti squash.

The arrangement works — when companies upstream participate. “That’s one blockage,” Zelman said. “Letting retailers and restaurants know that there are places like this, and the need exists. Especially in Fairfield County.”

The other, related, problem that she saw was coordinating food-related efforts across the city.

“Stamford has a food collaborative,” Zelman said. “We don’t have that in

Norwalk. There's not a lot of centralization in Norwalk.”

Centralized approach

Which brings us back to Jeffries at Stepping Stones Museum.

As he pondered how to bring nutritious, affordable food to the Healthyville Cafe, he realized that the problem was complex, involving food producers, processors and consumers and reducing the waste at various steps.

In his office, a white board is covered in sticky notes representing the flow of food from the land where it was grown onto the tables where it was consumed — the food equivalent of a watershed.

Jeffries began reaching out to organizations along that supply chain, which have come together to form the Norwalk Foodshed Initiative. The group hopes to solve the problem of making healthy food affordable and accessible.

The initiative is currently in fundraising mode to hire a consultant to conduct a Community Food Assessment Study, to gather data on where to direct resources.

“The Health Department and Norwalk Grows, they had been calling for this study for quite a while,” Jeffries said.

The end goal is to have a map of how food flows through the community and an understanding for how to deliver affordable food to places that need it most.

Lisa Lenskold of Norwalk Grows, a school garden program in Norwalk, said that lack of data has been barrier to understanding how extreme the issue of food access is in Norwalk. But she's hopeful that the problem can be addressed.

“The best way to do it is to have some data to make it a focus,” she said.

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