

Food Justice in Its Simplest Form

Community Kitchens Northwest a model for partnerships

BY LEIKA SUZUMURA

Food has an amazing way of bringing people together. We all relate to the fact that we need to eat, every day. This is why I chose to become a dietician; I knew that I could connect to anyone through food. However, I recognized that there was extreme inequality in the access to quality food and how that impacted people's health. I made a commitment early on that I wanted to bridge this access gap through knowledge and skills so that everyone could benefit from eating fresh, wholesome foods. This commitment brought me to have two jobs working with food in my community.

I work as a nutrition educator at PCC Natural Markets in the greater Seattle area, which gives me far reach into the community to teach the importance of organic food, environmental stewardship, and community engagement. And through my work with Community Kitchens Northwest, I have found a practical way to teach nutrition in a hands-on way that can empower individuals with affordable access, skills, and a sense of belonging.

Kitchens for teaching

It could be argued that community kitchens have been around since the beginning of human civilization. The basic concept is to bring people together in a common kitchen to cook and eat together. This ensures that everyone eats: food justice in its simplest form.

In 2007, a small group gathered at the Rainier Community Center in South Seattle for our first official community kitchen, initiated by a public health nurse, Diana Vergis Vinh. At the time, I was looking for a way to teach nutrition in a more hands-on way. I had found that most people know that fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are good for their health, but the real barrier is how to prepare these foods in a way that is easy, affordable, and tasty. The concept began to spread among other community leaders who are passionate about cooking and believe that teaching it is a way to impact the health of our communities. We formed Community Kitchens Northwest as a coalition in order to share recipes, ideas, and resources.

Our coalition quickly learned that each kitchen is slightly different, and there is no cookie cutter format for running a community



Community cook Syreeta Bernal.

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kitchen. The simple framework is to cook together, but each kitchen gets personalized to reflect the needs and wants of that specific community.

For example, at our original community kitchen, we cooked four recipes, to be taken home and eaten through the week or frozen for later in the month. Each person paid \$25 to cover the cost of ingredients, and the kitchen leader volunteered her or his time. Most participants were parents who wanted to have easy meals ready to reheat.

A year later, we started another community kitchen for WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) mothers that coincided with the change in WIC coupons to include more whole grains and vegetables. We focused on using ingredients such as brown rice, corn tortillas, and leafy greens into our meals, while keeping it low-cost

and attractive for a young palate. It cost each family \$5, subsidized by a small grant, and it engaged both children and parents in cooking once a month. We cooked and ate our meal together, and families also took home one or two prepared meals.

Soon, other community kitchens began to spring up around Seattle that focused on people with mental disabilities, low-income housing residents, and seniors.

Partnerships

What makes the community kitchens model so valuable is that it strengthens community vitality. Individuals gain self-reliance by developing skills to cook affordable, balanced meals, and they make connections with neighbors they previously did not know. Community Kitchens Northwest also has formed many partnerships with local businesses and farmers that begin to weave a web of food security on a micro level.

The partnership with PCC Natural Markets has given us access to organic food at wholesale cost. And one of our local farms, Full Circle Farms, is growing food less than 30 miles away and selling at wholesale rates. Both partnerships allow us to stretch our dollar further collectively than if we were to purchase individually.

For the first four years, Community Kitchens Northwest was completely volunteer-run. In 2011, it became a program of Seattle Tilth and applied jointly with Public Health King County and United Way for funding to reduce hunger in one of the most food insecure parts of the city, the Rainier Valley in South Seattle.

For this project "Rainier Valley Eats!" (RaVE!), we are taking an innovative approach that we call, "Grow. Share. Eat." This brings together garden education, local food distribution, and cooking. I was hired as the community kitchen coordinator to run our "Eat" programs, including cooking clubs at schools and child care centers, monthly community dinners, good food boxes (fresh produce for kitchen volunteers), and a work program for kitchen leaders.

Schools and child care centers have become a natural fit because we have the ability to reach students as well as parents, faculty, and community members. The students are hungry for the opportunity to cook. With the younger kids, we



Making granola bars at the Rainier community kitchen for the monthly community dinner.

cook with recipes and get input from them about what they want to make. With the older kids, we use more of an “intuitive cooking” approach, where we present a variety of ingredients, heavy on vegetables, and ask what they want to make. This encourages them to explore flavors and techniques and gets them comfortable making anything from nothing.

It has been an enormous success because we catch kids at an age when they are still interested and willing to try new things. We are able to integrate in math, history, and literacy right in the kitchen, working as a wonderful supplement to their daily lessons in the classroom. What we can see is an overall shift in the attitude towards food in schools.

There is growing need for food security in all neighborhoods. This is especially important now as we see the health of our communities diminish and the projection that this generation of children is going to have a shorter lifespan than their parents. The beauty of community kitchens is that they can be started in any community! It's one of the simplest ways to take action to transform our local food system to reflect our values. It builds a platform to exchange information and preserve knowledge around food and nourishment.

How can you start a community kitchen in your neighborhood? See if there already is interest, especially if you already work with existing groups. Start asking community centers or churches if they have a kitchen that can be used. We've had success accessing the kitchen in the staff lounges and in life skills classrooms at schools. Connect with local farmers, businesses, and even food banks as a resource for food.

With a growing food movement that supports everything from fair wages for farmers to freshening up the school menu, Community Kitchens Northwest is bringing it all right into the kitchen, strengthening our community one meal at a time. ■

For more information, check out our website at www.communitykitchensnw.org.



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