

We'll work for food

Food activists push for more nourishing neighborhoods

By Sena Christian

When food-justice organizers began planning the Del Paso Heights Community Farmers' Market, they looked inside the community, not outside. They recruited individuals in the area who had farming backgrounds but no access to land, finding five growers to produce fruits and vegetables on empty lots and residential properties in the neighborhood. They tapped into the expertise of local Hmong families who had a rich heritage in agriculture. They held community meetings to gather input and on July 9, 2005, the farmers' market opened for business at the Robertson Community Center.

As the only certified farmers' market in Sacramento County to accept the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer cards, and a convenient location for community members to purchase fresh produce at an affordable price, the seasonal market has attracted a steady clientele.

Last Saturday at Grant Union High School, Melissa Guajardo, program director of the Health Education Council, who spearheaded the Del Paso Heights project, spoke about inner-city farmers' markets to provide guidance for others looking to start markets in their own neighborhoods. She was part of "Building Healthy Communities Through Food," a sort of road map for activists who want better food in their neighborhoods.

"Food is a common denominator we can organize around," said Heather Fenney of the California Food and Justice Coalition, which sponsored the event. "If we're going to be successful in making change, it's about building relationships."

The workshop drew 32 participants from as far away as Stockton, Napa and Berkeley.

"We wanted to attract the average person who sees a need for a community garden or a farmers' market, not necessarily people already in the movement," said Nisha Kapadia of the Sacramento Hunger Coalition, an event co-sponsor.

Students with the Grant High School Environmental Organization began the workshop with a presentation on the garden-based education program. Students dig beds, plant, mow, harvest, work irrigation systems and build compost piles in the Garden of Ethnic American Treasures, located on campus. Community partnerships fund the program, while the sales of plants, flowers and salsa produced from the garden and sold at local farmers' markets and food co-ops allow it to flourish.

Workshop participants also saw firsthand the results of a convenience-store conversion project. Last year, Diana Cassady, assistant professor of public health sciences at UC Davis, assisted in changing the offerings at Jimmy's, a family-owned corner store in Del Paso Heights, to include fresh produce. Because of nationwide market consolidation, there is no large competitively priced market in the area, leaving residents with limited access to healthy foods.

Jimmy's also demonstrated the difficulty of maintaining projects impacted by the never-ending struggle of small-business owners to stay afloat in today's global economy. Bins for avocados, pears, apples, onions, bananas and sweet potatoes lay half empty.

Kristi Jacobs, who operates a movable market out of the Food Bank of Yolo County in Woodland, spoke about increasing access to health foods. Once a month, Jacobs delivers produce to low-income housing complexes and Head Start sites. The food is supplied through donations and purchased from Yolo County farmers.

"We want to put the money back into the community," Jacobs said. "It's important to keep that circle going."

Families receive 7 to 9 pounds of produce per month. Currently, recipients get the food for free but the food bank will transition to a fee-based program once grants run out.

Nisha Kapadia outlined an experiment in "edible landscaping" at the Kennedy Estates in south Sacramento. In 2004, volunteers planted 60 fruit trees at the low-income housing complex, and SHC continues to hold cooking demonstrations and culturally appropriate nutrition-education workshops at the site.

Randy Stannard spoke about the Soil Born Farm Urban Agriculture Project, a small certified-organic farm in north Sacramento. The farm participates in Community Supported Agriculture programs, in which a farmer grows food

for a group of local residents, called shareholders, who commit at the beginning of each year to purchase part of that farm's crop. Shareholders receive a low-cost weekly supply of fresh produce and farmers receive an initial cash investment to finance their operation.

Stannard stressed the importance of immediate action and collaboration in the food-justice movement.

"Now is the time, when we're focused on these issues, to pull people together and see successes and get more projects off the ground," he said.

The workshop ended with an exchange of phone numbers and a sense of solidarity. Rick Nafzinger, chairman of the Interfaith Council of San Joaquin, echoed the sentiments of many when he said he would return home with the tools necessary for the people in his community to make a change.

"I thought if I get one good idea from this workshop, it's going to be a good day," said Nafzinger, smiling at the group. "I have five pages worth."

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