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Cheap but Healthy



MicroGreens Project Indy arms area youths with the know-how to eat well

By Shawndra Miller

»Colleen Kincius is on a mission. This past summer the Indianapolis resident mobilized resources in support of an ambitious goal: to shift the way food dollars are spent. Her new nonprofit, MicroGreens Project Indy, aims to teach middle schoolers to shop for, cook and enjoy healthy dinners on a budget of just \$3.50 per meal for a family of four.

That's in line with what low-income families receive through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP, and formerly known as the Food Stamp Program.

Kincius is starting small, piloting the program at one school. But she's thinking big, with hopes of expanding into as many schools as possible with the help of volunteers. Eventually, she envisions partnering with schools that have on-site vegetable gardens.

“We have tons of ideas,” she says. “But we’re first focusing just on the nitty gritty, the basics, like buying things in bulk, ways to budget.” She notes that from a financial standpoint, eating organic or local is less feasible on a government-supplemented food budget.

The menus revolve around healthy food that’s both palatable to youthful appetites and easily accessible, not to mention affordable.

Transportation is a barrier for many families on SNAP, which is another reason to keep the meals simple. Kincius will shop for ingredients ahead of time in a store that parents are likely to frequent.

“I’ll be going to the grocery store closest to them, because transportation is a huge issue,” she explains. “Then I come to class and show them the receipt, price it out and show how it works.”

With her husband and co-founder, Drew Kincius, she plans to start working with small groups of young people this winter. They’ll use an eight-week curriculum developed by chef Allison Sosna of New York City.

Sosna began MicroGreens four years ago in Washington, D.C., where she had fed more than 1 million healthy meals to schoolchildren at eight public schools. There she realized that America’s epidemic levels of obesity start in childhood. She saw firsthand the problems faced by low-income families trying to make ends meet. Whether the kids were being raised by a single parent or two, typically the parents worked multiple jobs and had little time to devote to meal planning and preparation, especially on a shoestring budget.

Indy is just the latest city to adopt the project that takes a practical approach to changing dietary habits among this population.

Middle schoolers are the key to bottom-up change, Sosna has found. Her curriculum takes a hands-on approach to showing this age group what it's like to prepare meals that are both healthy and economical.

Some 46 million Americans are on SNAP, half of whom are minors. Much of that money gets spent on boxed and processed foods that are cheap but not very nutritious. The MicroGreens approach demonstrates how to target a limited budget toward healthier meals, emphasizing bulk buys, for example.

When funds are limited, it can be a mental leap for families to see the economics of putting money on a bulk bag of brown rice or

large container of oil. "It's hard for people to drop 25 bucks on olive oil up front," says Sosna. Her tactic is to show kids the math. "If they buy a liter," she says, "and then they only use a tablespoon at a time, it's less than 50 cents a serving."

Sosna flew in for a recent fundraiser to support the project's launch and to prep Kincius to use the curriculum. It's more than budgeting: From sanitation to knife skills to cooking techniques, the classes give youngsters a solid foundation to take home to their family kitchens.

"The whole class is taught with professionalism in line with the culinary business," says Sosna. Participants start using a chef's knife the first week, and anyone caught fooling around is shown the door.

By the final week, the students compete in a Top Chef-style cookoff. At graduation, they receive a cutting board, measuring spoon and Crock-Pot, as well as a certificate.

Comprehensive surveys before and after participation give a sense of the impact. The questions measure the child's nutritional savvy and eating habits, both of which tend to improve after the eight-week course. "We're

proving they're shopping more with their families and cooking more at home," says Sosna.

Kincius plans to pilot the program with an existing cooking club at public charter school KIPP Indy. She and her husband both have experience working with young children. They previously volunteered with the Patachou Foundation, teaching elementary-age kids about nutrition in an after-school class at Chase Near Eastside Legacy Center. That experience with food-insecure children showed them the potential for effecting lasting change.

"One thing I love about this program," Kincius says, "and working with middle schoolers in particular, is that first of all, they love teaching, too. ... Their minds are so open; they're taking all this in like a sponge, and they'll go home and teach their siblings, teach their parents, teach their aunts and uncles."

A lifestyle wellness coach at Eskenazi Health, she knows how much food affects health because she was once a junk food junkie, and her digestive tract was not happy about it. She describes those days with disarming frankness.

"I ate raw hot dogs on a regular basis," she says. "For every lunch at school I would have a honeybun, drink a Yoo-Hoo and have either nachos or some other junk that came off the assembly line."

Given those habits, she counts herself fortunate to not wind up in the roughly 33 percent of Indy residents who deal with obesity. Dogged by health problems, she eventually found her way to the book "Skinny Bitch," which opened her eyes to the power of food.

Once she turned her own health status around, she realized she had a passion for helping others. "I've always been very conscious of what's happening in the

community,” she says. Education made the difference for her, and she felt called to carry the message.

While she started a health coaching business, she began to wish for a way to bring change on a larger scale, particularly with people who couldn’t afford coaching. “You can help yourself; you can be healthy,” she wanted to tell them. “But the education just (wasn’t) there. I became very conscious of that, thinking, how can I help, and what can I do? Because I have these resources, but not everyone does.”

That’s when she saw a tweet from author Michael Pollan about Sosna’s work and began to explore bringing the MicroGreens Project to her own city.

Sosna calls Kincius a “spitfire” with great tenacity and an intuitive grasp of networking. “She’s very industrious,” Sosna says. “I see myself in her, and this knowledge of the greater picture and running with it.”

“I know the program’s going to do really well. Her heart is in it.”

How you can help:

»“Like” MicroGreens Project Indy on Facebook and share its work with your networks.

»Ask for Fresh Bucks at farmers markets.

»Apply to be a volunteer with MicroGreens Project Indy.

»Contribute to the ongoing crowdfunding initiative at gofundme.com/MicroGreensIndy (<http://gofundme.com/MicroGreensIndy>).

»Connect Kincius to businesses interested in becoming a fiscal sponsor or consider sponsoring the project yourself.

»Spread the word about MicroGreens across the nation and contact chef Allison Sosna through her website to start a project in your town.

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