Serving Up Nutrition with Zeal

THE NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAM serves a limited resource clientele through two branches. EFNEP, the Expanded Food Nutrition Education Program, targets families with young children. The Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program, or FSNE, is available to anyone who is eligible for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food assistance programs or receives public assistance. The programs provide a first step toward a healthier Kentucky by tackling problems often encountered by low-income families and individuals. “We see a correlation between inactivity and poverty, obesity and poverty, the lack of eating fruits and vegetables and poverty,” said Pam Sigler, extension specialist and NEP project manager.

The curriculum for both programs has seven essential units, based on the USDA’s food pyramid. In addition to being taught how to purchase better food on a limited income, clients learn how to prepare, store, and serve healthy foods from each of the food groups. The programs’ advantage is flexibility. They provide supplemental teaching lessons, covering such topics as budgeting and health problems, that can be tailored to clients’ needs.

“I Can Relate to Them”

It was nearly five years ago that Cathy Howell met Jenny Yarbrough at the local farmers market in McKee. Yarbrough, accompanied by her infant son, was selling produce from her garden. Howell, at the time the only nutrition education assistant for Jackson County extension, struck up a conversation and offered to bring some program materials by Yarbrough’s home. The two women became friends, and when another nutrition education assistant position opened up in the county, Yarbrough applied for and got the job.

Today, Yarbrough is passionate about her work as an EFNEP assistant. Her list of responsibilities is long and includes co-teaching a class of GED students with Howell, holding cooking classes, organizing physical fitness programs and day camps on nutrition, searching out recipes suitable for people with health problems, and providing nutrition resources to teachers.

“Every except the experts in the Nutrition Education Program (NEP) through UK Cooperative Extension. Around the state, NEP assistants and family and consumer sciences agents are helping to improve lives with advice on managing a limited food budget, getting enough physical activity, and eating more nutritiously.

“I’ve walked in their shoes.”

“I know what it’s like. I’ve been there,” says Yarbrough, who can still be found on summer Fridays at the farmers market, selling produce and offering recipes and advice. “I’ve walked in their shoes. And I give them programs that I like myself. That way it makes it easier and more fun for me to teach as well as for them to learn. Because it’s not a façade. It’s real life for me.”

Jenny Yarbrough (left) and client Tamara Allen Hall
center, April Dawson, a FSNE assistant, connected with Isata Jabbie, who had recently emigrated from Mali in West Africa. For two years, the women have been meeting at Jabbie’s home to discuss the preparation and safe storage of the “American food” for which Jabbie’s children clamor.

Health issues were also a topic of concern. Jabbie’s 5-year-old son had a calcium deficiency and as a result had to have his two front teeth pulled. Dawson showed Jabbie how she could wean her son away from sugary foods that helped destroy his teeth by introducing him to fresh fruits and vegetables.

It’s obvious that the two women have developed a rapport. There’s an ease to their conversation, despite the fact that Jabbie is still honing her English skills. The African woman is all smiles as she talks about how much she enjoys learning from Dawson.

“I’ve enjoyed the food, I’ve enjoyed everything,” she says, with a warm laugh. “It’s been nice. Good food for me and my children. They love the food.”

Howell combines knowledge gained from her “previous life working in catering” with what “UK has taught me about food and nutrition” and happily shares it with her clients. Among them is a group of young adults who are part of a community GED program called Youth Build.

“I do love this class,” she says, her enthusiasm palpable. She admits that at first her students were less than interested in her subject matter. But she got them into the kitchen and showed them how to make simple things like pot pies and fruit salad, how to set a proper table, and even how to add special touches like folding a napkin into a swan. In the meantime, they’re learning to add more fruits and vegetables to their diets and how to make those paychecks stretch a little further. Now, Howell says, “They just love the fact that… I talk to them about food and about nutrition and things like that.”

“If you’re trying to take a single snapshot of EFNEP and FSNE, it might not be possible. Everyone teaching the NEP curriculum has the freedom to attract and instruct clients in any way that will work. So, while some assistants seek out clients on a one-to-one basis, others spread their message through after-school programs, day camps, churches, libraries, community centers, family resource centers, and local government agencies.

NEP assistants in Jefferson County primarily meet with groups found through networking with local agencies and councils. But even in the group environment, one-on-one relationships sometimes develop. From a women’s group at a Louisville community center, April Dawson, a FSNE assistant, connected with Isata Jabbie, who had recently emigrated from Mali in West Africa. For two years, the women have been meeting at Jabbie’s home to discuss the preparation and safe storage of the “American food” for which Jabbie’s children clamor.

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What’s the Bottom Line?

It is expected that graduates of the Nutrition Education Program—those who have completed at least six lessons—will have learned to make some kind of positive change in their nutrition habits. According to Pam Sigler, after measurements are taken on behavioral changes in food safety, nutrition, and family resource management, statistics show that 95 percent of graduates have changed their habits for the better.

So what’s the bottom line? How important is it to teach people methods for healthier eating? According to Sigler, it benefits all of us.

“About 10 years ago, Virginia Tech did a study,” she said, “and it showed that for every dollar that was spent in EFNEP, it saved the government $10.26 in health care costs because of the changes that were made in people’s behaviors.”

It’s a lesson many people could stand to remember when they choose food that is fast and cheap over healthy. As a popular ad campaign of a few years ago said, you can pay now or you can pay later. The University of Kentucky’s Nutrition Education Program urges you to “pay now” to create a healthier “later.”

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“They Love the Food”

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