

Community Assistantship Program

Final Report: Dream of Wild Health Project

Prepared in partnership with
Dream of Wild Health

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Emily Noble
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Final Report: Dream of Wild Health Project

Thank you to CURA and the Community Assistantship Program for making this work possible in enriching the lives of high school kids by exposing them to the origins of food and how to incorporate fresh foods into their diet.

Summary

Dream of Wild Health is a community organization whose mission encompasses both preserving seeds of Indigenous Native American plants and also bringing together a wealth of cultural knowledge for the preservation of indigenous tradition. One of the major focuses of the organization is a youth summer camp, which brings twin cities urban youth out to an organic farm where they learn to grow, harvest, and sell indigenous crops in a culturally traditional manner. In addition to growing produce, urban youth who come to the farm learn how to prepare farm grown food for consumption. My role as a research assistant was two fold, the first was to help the youth learn to prepare and enjoy grown food and understand nutritional considerations in meal preparation by cooking lunches and snacks with them. The second was to assist with the planting of seed saved beans and develop a variety of bean soup recipes which the youth would find palatable. The beans were harvested in late August and will be undergoing testing for antioxidants, minerals and phytochemicals this fall. Final soup recipes have been submitted to DWHN, in addition to other favorites from the summer and will be compiled into a cookbook this upcoming year. The question as to whether it is possible to get urban youth with preferences for highly processed food to eat meals that are high in fiber and relatively low in salt and sugar was addressed. While not all of the kids embraced the idea of eating vegetables at first, by the end of the summer the majority of them left saying that the food was one of their favorite things about the camp.

The Farm and the Farmers

DWHN is located on a small organic farm (they are not yet certified organic, but they use traditional growing methods which are free from pesticide use) in Hugo, MN. Throughout the summer there was an abundance of vegetables available to cook with, as well as hominy (which we made in the spring), wild rice (donated) and a freezer full of game. Supplemental foods were used sparingly. Aside from growing indigenous bean varieties, my job on the farm included developing recipes, teaching cooking classes, talking about nutrition and food combinations, and trying to be a good mentor to urban American Indian kids.

The summer was split into two sessions for “Garden Warriors” (high school kids) and four sessions for “Cora’s Kids” (middle school age). We had two different groups of Garden Warriors and four different groups of Cora’s Kids (one girl in this group stayed all summer). The first group of kids arrived on June 30.

Planting the Beans

At the end of May, Sally, the executive director of DWHN asked me if I would consider planting and harvesting the beans myself. Having no prior gardening experience, I was hesitant to comply, but Sally remarked that it was very important to the organization that I have a relationship with the beans. I tell this story because it illustrates some of the cultural health practices that were to take place throughout the summer. My involvement with DWHN was in this way, a cooperative effort. I was there not only to teach experientially, but also to learn how to nurture in a cultural context different from my own. Thus, my work with Dream of Wild Health began during the second week of June, when I planted 8 rows of three different varieties of indigenous seed saved beans.

The harvesting of these beans happened in August, and therefore I was not able to do much experimenting with the indigenous bean varieties throughout the summer. I did, however, prepare recipes with beans that are comparable in size, color and texture, with the idea that the indigenous beans would be able to be substituted once harvested.

Day 1

Previous experience has shown me that when cooking for kids it is important to earn their trust, one bad experience with an ingredient turn cause a kid to avoid all reminiscent ingredients for life! The first day was a tough one. The choice to begin with various vegetable dishes and hominy cakes was a mistake I would not make again during the second session. The adults loved the meal, but many of them reported a previous preference for natural foods. The kids came with high tolerances to sugar and salt and a highly processed diet. Many of them reported eating fast food often, as well as salty chips and soda. Many of them didn't eat the meal prepared, some probably because of social pressure (there friends said it wasn't "cool") some because there was no meat in it, and some because of previous bias "I don't like vegetables". The ones who did eat found the hominy cakes lacked flavor. That meal haunted me for the rest of the summer, with comments like "I liked the program and the farm and the food, except those hominy cakes". Some of the program directors, fearful that the kids would not get any nourishment while on the farm (some of the kids reported having nothing at all to eat at home sometimes), were ready to pull out the Doritos.

A New Approach

I decided to try a recipe that the kids were familiar with, use natural sugars in moderation, and keep the cultural health practice of using ingredients that are from the earth only. We had egg rolls with pork, kolarahbi and carrot filling, fried wild rice with

vegetables and a salad. The kids helped with the egg rolls and we had a science lesson on emulsification in salad dressings. The second day was a success, with renewed confidence I pursued this direction with the kids for the remainder of the summer. The second group of kids seemed to be a bit more gastronomically well educated and came with more of a preference for natural foods. They were particularly excited to learn about how to bake bread and make their own pizzas from scratch with spinach and broccoli topping.

A typical day on the farm went as follows:

9:00 AM – kids arrive

9:15 AM – youth leaders prepare snack (homemade granola, celery and natural peanut butter, apples and peanut butter, dried cranberries and nuts, oatmeal)

9:30 AM – circle (sage smudging, prayer, offering tobacco, announcements, offering of gratitude)

10:00 AM – I disappeared into the kitchen to cook, kids went out into the fields to harvest or have garden lessons.

11:15 AM – A small group of about 5 students join me in the kitchen for a culinary lesson and to assist in meal preparation.

12:00 PM – Circle for lunch, prayer, spirit dish preparation, lunch crew explanation of meal, lunch

Lunch was generally an animated and lengthy event.

1:00 PM – Lunch crew assists me with clean-up, others have crafts or lessons

1:30 PM – Exercise, games (volleyball, hiking, swimming, yoga)

2:30 PM – Kids leave

Every Thursday the kids would set up a market in Minneapolis where they would sell the produce they harvested. Evidence of what they learned in the kitchen came out during these days, when the kids would explain to customers what they could prepare with the less well-known items. Due to increased gas prices and a limited budget, we kept the kids in the cities after the market closed on these days. Some of the activities we did with them included touring native art at the Minneapolis Art Institute, visiting the sculpture garden, and swimming in the lakes.

Proposal Questions

As outlined in our proposal, the following questions have been addressed.

1. “Can indigenous bean varieties grown by DWHN at its Hugo farm be incorporated into recipes and foods that Native children, youth and elders find acceptable and desirable?”

Many of the kids who visited the farm spoke of breakfasts consisting of candy bars and energy drinks. Like many high school kids, they had a preference for fast food and candy. My challenge was to create recipes with the kids, which would be appealing to them, using mainly farm-grown ingredients. Each day I worked with a different group of students to prepare the lunch meal. The most successful recipes were the ones containing a familiar form to what the kids were used to (sample favorites include wild “fried rice” with vegetables from the garden and egg rolls, venison meatballs, breaded eggplant and zucchini with garden tomato compote, pizza with broccoli and cheddar, venison and vegetable “hot pockets” with mushroom gravy). The kids were able to draw on their experience preparing lunches to suggest recipes to customers at their weekly farmers market.

As mentioned previously, the greatest culinary cultural divide was between adult culture and youth culture on the farm. In the beginning of the summer it seemed the more vegetables I incorporated, the happier the adults and the more the kids whined. Once the kids developed a connection between their own work on the farm and the vegetables many of them started to develop an appreciation. By the end of the summer, some of them were even excited to take the produce home.

While some of the kids struggled with getting used to meals with high fiber content, the kids found the beans to be palatable. They had an obvious preference for meals, which echoed things found on a fast food menu (prepared with culturally significant healthful ingredients).

2. “What cultural cooking and food practices can be used to enhance the indigenous bean recipes and foods?”

A traditional cooking practice, which was taught to the kids and which I attempted to abide by as well, is to maintain a positive attitude while cooking. Traditional Native culture is of the belief that the emotional state of the preparer of the food is transferred to the food. (Cantrell, 2001) Native American traditional foods were incorporated on a daily basis, however traditional methods of cooking over an open fire were not used. The hominy and wild rice were harvested according to traditional methods, but not during the summer session. Aside from minor supplemental ingredients in the beginning of the season, all ingredients came fresh from the earth and offerings of tobacco were made back to the earth in accordance with Native spiritual custom. It is an Indian belief that all food, which comes the earth is from the Creator and therefore healthy. (Cantrell, 2001) The fact that most of the ingredients used in the soups and lunches were harvested by hand contributed greatly to the flavor of the food. At the beginning of each meal a spirit dish was made and offered (one of Cora’s Kids told me that millions of spirits can feed off of one crumb of food). We took a moment to appreciate the food offered before we ate. Elders and guests were shown respect by being allowed to eat first, this was a practice I found to be counter to my own cultural upbringing.

Preliminary research has suggested that the black turtle, potowanami, rabbit, adzuki, and long white good beans grown from the saved seed at the Dream of Wild Health project in Hugo, MN might have superior health benefits to the high school kids who visit the farm.

3. “Do the culturally desirable recipes and foods made with DWHN indigenous beans retain the antioxidant activity associated with raw starting material?”

At the beginning of the summer we planted the indigenous beans again, which we were able to harvest in August. Indigenous seed and market variety seed were planted side by side to obtain a clear picture of how the beans compare when grown in the same

soil. Recipes are still awaiting analysis for antioxidant content, this year's crop of beans is also awaiting analysis. Recipes were shared with locals in the community on two separate occasions when feasts were held. The bean soups were popular among the community.

Bean soup recipes from the summer have been submitted, along with other popular recipes made with the kids, to a Dream of Wild Health Cookbook. The kids will be able to use the recipes (as well as draw on their own experiences at the farm) to incorporate beans and vegetables into foods prepared at home.

Ideas for the Future

As a major component of the kid's day revolves around the lunch meal, there is a future need for the continuation of culinary education for the kids. The opportunity to grow and prepare one's own food is a tremendous opportunity to increase healthfulness as complies with the definition of healthfulness from traditional Native American Wisdom (eat that which comes from the earth) (Cantrell, 2001). It is unfortunate that due to funding the kids could only make it out to the farm three days a week. The development of food products to sell, in addition to the ability to sell crop shares are expansions currently under consideration by the project. Both of these projects would require additional staff. There is talk around the farm of expanding the kitchen into an industrial sized kitchen, to be able to accommodate the production of marketable goods. An expanded kitchen would help the program to grow, and be able to take more kids each session. The need for additional staff was increased this year and will continue to increase as the farm continues to yield a greater crop size.

References

Cantrell, Betty Geishirt, "Access and Barriers to Food Items and Food Preparation among Plains Indians" *Wicazo SA Review* Spring 2001: 65-74.