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Health and sustainability at the lunch table

Sharon Abercrombie | Apr. 10, 2010

Fourth-graders at Sleepy Hollow School in Orinda, Calif., eat their Children's Choice lunches: nut-free pesto pasta, four-cheese ravioli, and a hamburger made with vegetarian-fed beef on an artisan white/wheat bun.

OAKLAND, CALIF. -- Thirteen years ago, Justin Gagnon, then a freshman at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, never dreamed that he and two good friends would one day become future school lunch heroes to kids, their parents and the planet.

Today, Gagnon, Ryan Mariotti and Keith Cosbey are co-owners of Children?s Choice, a school lunch program that thrives in both Northern and Southern California. Children?s Choice serves 22 elementary schools in the Oakland diocese, plus 70 more throughout the Bay Area scattered through six counties. In recent months, 25 percent of schools in the Orange diocese have signed on. So have a number of schools in both the Long Beach areas and the Los Angeles archdiocese. Total number to date: 130 schools, both private and public.

The partners? business plan brims with ecological sustainability: ?Change the way kids eat -- one kiwi or tangelo at a time,? Gagnon, 31, explained. And then, of course, make sure they remember to compost the peels as well as their dishes.

What could be more sustainable than moving children away from the poor nutrition/obesity track while being good to the planet at the same time? he asks. ?Sounds fine to us,? parents have answered. Besides the positive nutritional and ecological results, parents love not having to pack brown-bag lunches five days a week. Meanwhile their offspring are saying ?yum? to kiwis, tangelos, jicama, and ?yes? to pot stickers and lentil curry -- in addition to those universal favorites, cheese pizza and chicken tenders.

Gagnon, a native of Danville, Calif., re-launched Children?s Choice, his caterer parents? small school lunch program, in 2003 with two school friends he?d met as an undergrad while participating in Notre Dame?s glee club

Gagnon, Cosbey and Mariotti expanded on Larry and Mary Gagnon?s original sandwich-based school lunch service by adding a selection of healthy, low-fat hot entrées made with organic produce and naturally raised beef and chicken.

There?s nary a cookie infused with high-fructose corn syrup nor a hormone-laced carton of milk anywhere in sight at a Children?s Choice school. Besides four hot dish choices served each day, there are 12 cold entrées, plus a wide variety of fruits, vegetables and healthy drinks. Toothsome examples include herbed chicken with oven-roasted potatoes and organic zucchini (cut into kid-friendly bite-sized coins), beef enchiladas, salad, fresh fruit, bow-tie pasta with baby veggies, and jicama.

Both parents and kids relish the program. It?s a big hit at St. Lawrence O?Toole School in Oakland, with 60 percent of the 160 students participating. Principal Ann Pires of St. David School in Richmond lauds the program for its convenience: ?Nothing has to be dealt with at the school level.? Some 40 to 50 kids there are frequent eaters.

Here?s how the program works: Parents, in consultation with their kids, order meals online a month in advance, paying an average of $4.45 per lunch. If a child is ill, Mom can e-mail that very morning by 9 a.m. to cancel lunch. Most participating families order the lunches on an average of two to three times a week.

Meals are delivered steaming hot in one of Children?s Choice?s cheerful red and white trucks. The service maintains three kitchens in Danville, San Jose and Huntington Beach, with more than 80 employees who work as kitchen staff, administration, outreach educators and bus drivers.

As the U.S. economy continues to struggle, Cosbey, director of school relationships, acknowledges a decline in participation, but said it?s been balanced with an increase of dual-income families who have less time in the morning for lunch-packing chores.

Meanwhile, the company has a larger mission reaching beyond cooking and delivering food. The team has developed an environmental education program for their schools, and places a major emphasis on recycling. ?It really made us look into our trash,? said Chris Olofson, a St. Theresa School parent in Oakland.

Olafson said she sees a third advantage to the hot lunch programs. ?It?s a nice school recruiting tool that can appeal to busy working moms,? she said.

Working on behalf of the planet and feeding kids good wholesome food were not in the owners? original plans.

Gagnon studied management information systems at Notre Dame. Mariotti focused on chemical engineering. Cosbey juggled double majors in computer application programming and piano performance.

Three years after graduation, the friends had built careers in the corporate world, but discovered they were tired of the grind. There had to be more life-sustaining work out there someplace, right?

The ?someplace? emerged when Gagnon?s dad said he?d pay the trio?s airfare to Oakland if they?d do him a favor. Larry Gagnon needed them to help design a Web site for his new school lunch program. Feeding children and saving the environment as a possible right livelihood beckoned to them. The friends soon formed a business partnership with the senior Gagnons, and a revived Children?s Choice was the result.

Gagnon comes from mixed French and Italian ancestry. His grandfather, Paul Gagnon, owns a restaurant in Martinez, Calif. Large, festive family dinners were part of his growing-up years. So was helping to pick cherries -- most of the luscious fruit ended up in his and his four siblings? stomachs instead of the baskets, he recalls.

His interest in environmental sustainability was piqued during his senior year at Notre Dame when he took a class on consumerism. ?The professor was fantastic. He probed us to really reflect on the impacts of overconsumption in our lives, our planet and our future generations,? Gagnon recalled. The class studied Eric Schlosser?s 2001 book, Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal, which explored food and its marketing to children.

?This was before Schlosser became a widely known spokesperson for the sustainable food movement and before the word sustainability was even commonplace in our vernacular,? Gagnon said. ?The class really got me to think deeply about our association with food and the driving factors behind the food choices we make, as well as the local and global impacts of the choices at both a societal and environmental level.?

Gagnon would in just three short years use the information he had learned in that class to begin a new career.

Mariotti, 32, credits his work with Children?s Choice as the result of his growing up in Arizona. An avid backpacker, ?I remember the oft-espoused ?Take only pictures, leave only footprints? mantra of expedition leaders, and the frustration that often came when witnessing the lack of respect that some outdoorsmen would show by leaving trash and destroying trails.?

Mariotti said he refined his reverence for the environment as a student at a Jesuit high school in Phoenix and later at the University of Notre Dame. ?My science and engineering studies opened my eyes to the larger-scale offenses to our planet and installed a sense of needing to do something. The astronomical probabilities that produced our human-inhabitable earth are so small, and yet why can?t we care and cherish this one gift from our Creator?? he said. Mariotti?s ecological bible is Alan Weisman?s The World Without Us, a work that ?contributed to my perspectives on how our actions now might affect future generations.?

A self-proclaimed obsessive about energy, Mariotti said he has been reading everything he can about the history of petroleum energy and large-scale renewable energy plans. His work at Children?s Choice reflects many of his ecological experiences. He has done away with paper by setting up Web-based ordering. Mariotti found a company to develop compostable school food service packaging for Children?s Choice. His current ongoing focus is nudging local counties and waste management authorities toward better composting techniques.

As a kid, Cosbey?s food tastes were developed and refined by his mom?s delicious cooking, especially her homemade chicken noodle soup. After he left home from Buffalo, N.Y., for college, his mother often showed up with her pressure cooker in tow, to bring a little taste of home to his college campus.

Cosbey met Gagnon and Mariotti when the three of them joined the Notre Dame glee club. Throughout their four years at Notre Dame, the entire group would eat dinner together after evening rehearsals five nights a week. Sharing those meals built community -- ?more nourishing than a meal alone,? Cosbey said.

Cosbey, 31, has not abandoned his music major. As a member of St. Joan of Arc Parish in San Ramon, he serves as vocal director of the annual teen musical. He also teaches confirmation class and is the youngest member of the pastoral council.

Last year, Cosbey and Gagnon sang in the choir at the dedication of Oakland?s new Cathedral of Christ the Light.

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On the Web
Children?s Choice
www.choicelunch.com

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