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A Sebastopol based nonprofit is challenging traditional approaches to nutrition education with an innovative model that addresses a host of needs at the community level. Ceres Community Project began with a simple idea: bring teens into the kitchen to learn about cooking healthy food by having them serve as volunteer chefs preparing nourishing meals for people dealing with illness. Today, the organization has kitchens in both Sonoma and Marin counties, and collectively will deliver nearly 50,000 free meals in 2012 alone. In its first five years, the group engaged 700 teens in 25,000 hours of service learning, and provided 130,000 meals to 900 clients and their families. Not surprisingly, communities across the country are asking for the organization’s help to create similar programs in places as far flung as Nashville, Tennessee; Bay Village, Ohio; and Belfast, Maine.

“As humans, one of our deepest longings is to know that our lives matter, and to feel that connection with others,” says founder Cathryn Couch. “The heart of our work is about creating that experience for everyone involved, and, in the process re-connecting all of us to the healing power of real food prepared with love. Ceres is, at its core, very simple: it’s about returning to the wisdom of our grandmothers.”

It all started with a call from a friend asking if Couch could give her daughter a job and teach her how to cook. Without a formal way to do that, Couch designed a project where she and 17-year-old Megan Salkin met once a week in the summer of 2006 to prepare meals for three people dealing with health challenges: a family of four with two pre-teens and a mom with stage four metastasized breast cancer, a single woman living alone with breast cancer, and a man recovering from a stroke, living alone and unable to cook. The recipients were deeply grateful for the gift of meals and Megan was gaining valuable skills in healthy eating and food preparation. But what inspired Couch to take the idea to a larger scale was seeing the pride Megan took in making the difference for others.

Ceres Project launched officially in March 2007, with six teens cooking for four families using a donated church kitchen. Today, Ceres is housed in a 3,000-square-foot, newly remodeled building in downtown Sebastopol, with a half-acre food production garden on land owned by O’Reilly Media. The Marin program operates two days a week from the kitchen at Whistlestop, an agency that provides services for seniors and the disabled in downtown San Rafael.

Ceres’ mission is to restore whole food and community connections to their central place as the foundation of health. “Over the past 50 years,” says Couch, “there has been a fundamental shift in our diets, away from fresh whole foods towards a much more highly processed diet. During the same period, there’s been a breakdown in what we might call the fabric of social relationships. Fewer people live near their families, we stay at the same job for longer periods of time, and informal social groups like bowling leagues and neighborhood gatherings have declined dramatically. We know from a whole host of studies that social isolation is extremely detrimental for our well being, both

Cathryn Couch, MBA founder and executive director of the Ceres Community Project, is a professional chef and activist. She has worked in the corporate and not-for-profit worlds, including serving as Director of Communications for The Hunger Project-U.S., an educational organization focused on changing public understanding about the causes of and solutions to hunger in the world.
MAKING A DIFFERENCE

physically and emotionally. Last but not least, we’ve become much less self-reliant and this makes people feel powerless. We have a mentality, especially here in the U.S., that we can do whatever feels good and then when we get sick, the doctor will fix us.”

These trends have taken their toll. More than 40 percent of Americans are now obese, nearly triple the number just 40 years ago. In half of all deaths in the U.S., about 53 percent, poor nutrition and excessive weight are precipitating causes. The American Cancer Society believes that as much as one third of all cancers could be avoided by changes in diet. Nearly 26 million Americans are diabetic, and another 79 million are pre-diabetic.

Ceres’ innovative model integrates nourishing support to people facing health challenges with education about healthy eating, youth development, and community building into a simple but profound model for revitalizing community. “We believe that what we call health or well-being grows most fundamentally from the vitality of the food we eat, our connection with the earth that grows it, our sense of worth and belonging as part of our larger human family, and regaining a sense of control over our lives,” Couch says.

Ceres’ approach focuses on getting as many people involved as possible, knowing that each person will benefit from being connected through meeting the basic needs of others, and that the organization’s multifaceted message will trickle out and inspire healthier habits. Ceres participants includes clients, hundreds of teen and adult volunteers, dozens of in-kind food donors from local farms to national grocers and food producers such as Whole Foods Market, Redwood Hill Dairy, and Gourmet Mushrooms, as well as nearly a thousand individual donors.

On any given Monday through Thursday afternoon, the Ceres kitchen in Sebastopol is bustling with a dozen or more teens busy preparing the nearly 1,000 beautiful, delicious and nourishing meals that leave the kitchen each week. The young people come from more than 30 schools in Sonoma (teens in the Marin project come from about a dozen schools). Working under the guidance of volunteer adult mentors, the teens are responsible for managing all aspects of the kitchen—from preparing the fresh produce that goes into the meals to packaging the finished dishes, folding laundry, and mopping the floors. Teens wearing green Ceres Project aprons with their names embroidered have been in the kitchen for three to six months. Those with the coveted chef coats are Teen Leaders. Selected for their commitment to the program, these teens help welcome and orient newcomers to the program, assist with the monthly volunteer orientation, manage other teens in preparing recipes, speak publicly on behalf of the group, and serve on Ceres’ board of directors.

Meals are delivered directly to clients’ homes on Wednesday afternoons and Friday mornings by volunteer Delivery Angels. Ceres’ clients face a host of health challenges from Crohn’s Disease and multiple sclerosis to Hepatitis C and cancer. Delivered meals can make a profound difference, as past client Claire Victor shared at the group’s 2011 annual fundraiser: “I knew I had to eat food to sustain my life energy but my old food patterns were not anything I could eat, nor did I feel like eating at all. Thursday was delivery day and it became like Christmas. The food was exciting, new, and nourishing. There were days when I thought I couldn’t eat at all but then there would be some interesting dish that got the better of my curiosity and I would want to taste it to see what it was. Then before you knew it, there I was, eating! And it felt so right to eat what I knew was healing and supporting my immune system while moving through this difficult and frightening health challenge. Somehow, the food helped me start to feel safe again in my body.”

A volunteer “client liaison” visits each client at home to explain how the program works and the type of food they’ll be receiving. Liaisons contact their clients each week to provide support and ensure that the client’s food needs are being met. Along with meal support, Ceres offers a range of educational programs to help clients and their families make the change to a healthier diet. Monthly offerings include Healthy Food Basics, an introductory class, and “Tea & Talk,” a program...
featuring guest experts addressing a range of topics related to food and wellness. Healing Foods Cooking Course, a three-week program, was designed specifically to help those recovering from serious illness understand how to cook and eat for health. The program, offered about seven times each year, includes hands-on cooking time as well as lectures and mind body practices.

"When I had the idea for Ceres, it was clear that there were at least two important positive benefits: teens would learn to cook and eat healthy fresh foods, and people in the community dealing with illness would have the support of nourishing meals at a time when that really matters," Couch says. "Now we realize that bringing these pieces together creates real magic for everyone involved and for the larger community. We know from our clients that the meals are making a life-saving difference. Beyond that, there is a profound sense of being cared for by the larger community, and this is also deeply healing. The direct experience of fresh whole foods—and how much better people feel as a result—is leading to healthier eating for the long term, not only for clients but for their families as well."

"For teens, too, there are many levels of impact. "All of our teens eat kale and know how to cook it!" Couch jokes. Early results from a USDA-funded study show that these teens are also making healthier food choices. After six months in the program, teens report a 17 percent increase in fruit and vegetable consumption, a 24 percent increase in the variety of fruits and vegetables they are eating, and they are 22 percent more likely to talk with their friends and family about their food choices.

But it is the involvement in helping others that will make the most profound difference for teens lucky enough to pass through the Ceres Community Project kitchen, Couch believes. "We have always received lots of thank you cards and letters from the clients," she says. "We call these 'love notes.' A few years ago, we started asking clients to come in and meet with the teens and share their stories. This is now a central part of what we do and it's deeply meaningful for everyone involved." Teen volunteers at Ceres have sat with a husband whose wife passed away just days before, with a woman who talked with them about her experience knowing that she was dying, and with people who have beaten the odds their doctors gave them.

"Every single teen who works with us knows that they are making a healing, if not a life-saving, difference each time they step into the kitchen," Couch says. "There is no more potent way of teaching healthy lessons than being part of saving lives—maybe even your own.”

CERES 'LOVE NOTES'

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Teaching the healing power of food

As head chef of Westerbeke Ranch, John Littlewood spends most of his days creating delicious, healthy gourmet cuisine for guests who stay at the conference and retreat center tucked away off the beaten path in the beautiful Sonoma Valley. It's pretty much a dream gig for him, working in the heart of Wine Country with its panoply of fresh produce, fine wines, and world-class restaurants. He has free license to express his artistry, creating inventive new dishes and tweaking tried and true favorites, bound only by the availability of locally sourced ingredients and guests' dietary needs. "We're kind of known for our food," he says of the ranch. "I get to cook restaurant quality food in a retreat setting."

Once a month, he spends a day in the Ceres Community Project kitchen, keeping a watchful eye over a crew of teenage apprentices, shepherding them through the preparation of a five-course meal to be packaged and delivered to people in poor health. What draws a classically trained chef—who studied at the California Culinary Academy and built a career cooking in top shelf venues throughout France, the Caribbean, and the San Francisco Bay Area—to pour his considerable skills and talent into corralling teenagers?

A few years ago during a difficult phase of his life, Littlewood came across the Ceres Project's cookbook 'Nourishing Connections' in a grocery store. He was intrigued by the organization's two-pronged mission to train teens in kitchen and feed to ill people in their homes. "I started to realize that what I needed personally was to give my talents to something that wasn't about making money. I wanted to give back somehow," he says. "Having taught before, I missed teaching people and watching the light go on when they add those skills in their lives."

Now he is one of a dozen or more "mentor chefs" who contribute their time and talents to Ceres Project under the direction of the organization's executive chef, Rob Hogen-camp. The mentor chefs are tasked with working with the teens to take Hogen-camp's menus and recipes from paper to preparation to packaging for the twice weekly meal deliveries to as many as 80 families throughout Sonoma County.

The mentor chef's role is to keep the volunteer youth focused on their tasks while training them in cookery skills. The young people wind up learning a lot more along the way. "Rob (Hogen-camp) and the Ceres staff are very positive. Everybody feels good about what they're doing so that translates to the students," Littlewood says. "Kids get exposed to local organic food and the power of food to change people lives, working in an environment where people love what they do. There are so many lessons there."

Wherever they are headed, the teens carry those lessons and skills with them. Many start cooking more at home, much to the delight of their parents. And even though Ceres is not technically a vocation program, Littlewood notes, "If all goes well, some of these young people might get turned on to the world of professional cooking. For many of these kids I think this is also about figuring out what really makes you happy in your life. Cooking was that for me."

And of course, the students aren't the only ones learning and benefitting from their involvement in Ceres Project. "I get so many rewards from doing this, from learning from other mentor chefs to helping the teens add new skills in their lives to feeding people in their homes," Littlewood says. "I deeply appreciate getting to work in Ceres' beautiful, state-of-the-art facility in Sebastopol with fresh ingredients straight from the adjacent garden, manifesting the very essence of "cooking closer to the earth," an increasingly popular trend in the culinary world. As a veteran Wine Country chef, Littlewood thought he understood this but the Ceres Project has raised his awareness of what it means to cook with ingredients that are as fresh, organic, and local as possible."

"Cooking school trains you to go to the refrigerator and get out a box of produce that may have come from anywhere in the world. Being part of Ceres has awakened me to how fresh and healthy food can be. I think every cook should be exposed to gardening to really understand where their food comes from."

Littlewood believes that bringing nutrition-dense, delicious, artfully prepared food directly to people during a time of compromised health and great vulnerability completes a missing link in health care. "It's become clear to me that if our medical system was better, this would be part of it. This is a mission that needed doing and Cathryn (Couch) was visionary enough to make it happen. Ceres Project is very forward thinking. The program is being modeled now in other areas. It all speaks to the idea of food as medicine, something I had heard before but now I get to see how it actually works."
Healthy Recipes for the Holidays

Ceres Community Project's *Nourishing Connections Cookbook* is the source of these nutrient-rich dishes for the holidays.

**Pumpkin Curry Soup with Coconut Milk**

This luscious fall soup gets a zip of flavor from curry paste and fresh lime.

**Ingredients**
- ½ T olive oil or coconut oil to sauté
- 1 c chopped onion
- 1 15-ounce can coconut milk
- 2 c cooked and mashed pumpkin, winter squash, or yam (or 1 15-ounce can)
- 2 c vegetable stock or water
- ½ tsp yellow curry paste
- 1 tsp sea salt
- ½ - 1 T grade B maple syrup
- 2 T lime juice
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro, chopped

**Directions:**
1. In a medium sized soup pot, sauté the onion in the olive or coconut oil until the onion is tender and translucent, about five minutes.
2. Add the coconut milk, pumpkin or winter squash, stock or water, curry paste and sea salt, starting with the smaller amount of curry paste. Bring the soup to a simmer and cook, slightly covered, for about fifteen minutes to blend the flavors. Cool.
3. Carefully blend the soup to a silky smoothness. Add the maple syrup and lime juice, whisking to combine. Taste the soup and adjust with more curry, maple syrup, or lime juice. Warm the soup before serving and garnish with fresh cilantro.

**Walnut & Herb Stuffed Portobello Mushrooms with Burgundy Sauce**

This elegant vegetarian entrée will please all your guests, regardless of their dietary preferences.

**Ingredients**
- 4 large Portobello mushrooms, wiped clean and gills removed
- 8 oz sprouted whole grain bread (or rice bread)
- 8 oz walnuts (preferably soaked and dehydrated)
- 2 c minced onion
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- ¼ c fresh parsley, chopped
- ¼ tsp dried thyme
- ½ c grated carrots
- ½ tsp dried sage
- 1 rib celery, minced
- ¼ tsp sea salt
- 2 T olive oil
- 1 cup diced tomato in juice

**Burgundy Sauce Ingredients**
- 3 T butter or olive oil
- ¼ c whole-wheat pastry flour or rice flour
- ½ c red wine
- 2½ T tamari
- 1¼ c vegetable broth

**Directions:**
1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F.
2. In a food processor, grind the walnuts and bread together until they are very fine. Place in a large bowl. Add the rest of filling ingredients through the diced tomatoes. Mix to combine everything evenly. The filling should hold together. Divide the filling evenly among the mushrooms, packing to fill the cavity.
3. Bake for 30-40 minutes or until the mushrooms are tender and the filling is set and browned.
4. While the mushrooms are baking, prepare the sauce. Melt the butter in a small saucepan. Whisk in the flour and cook, stirring constantly, for about two minutes. Whisk in the wine, tamari, and stock. Bring to a low boil, whisking the entire time to keep the sauce smooth. Simmer for a few minutes until the sauce is thick and creamy.
5. Serve mushrooms drizzled with sauce and pass extra sauce for your guests. The sauce is also delicious over mashed potatoes.
GARLICKY TUSCAN KALE SALAD

Combine two nutritional powerhouses—garlic and kale—for a winning salad that works year round.

Ingredients
1 bunch kale, lacinato* preferred but any kind will do
1-2 cloves garlic, pressed in a garlic press or finely minced
¼ cup or more grated Pecorino, Romano, or Asiago cheese
3 T olive oil
2 T fresh lemon juice
¼ tsp sea salt
¼–½ cup fresh whole grain bread crumbs, crumbled between your fingers

* Also known as Tuscan kale

Directions:
1. Remove the kale leaves from the stems, then pile them up and slice thinly into ribbons. Place in a large bowl.
2. Combine the garlic with the cheese, olive oil, lemon juice, sea salt, and pepper to taste.
3. Pour the dressing over the kale, massaging the kale with your fingers as you toss it.
4. Add in the breadcrumbs, then garnish with a drizzle of olive oil and additional cheese.

CASHEW Cardamom Balls

These raw, gluten-free cookies are a wonderful addition to your holiday table.

Ingredients
1 c unsweetened coconut
1 c lightly toasted cashew pieces
1 c very finely chopped dates
¼ tsp ground cardamom zest of one orange

Directions:
1. Toast the coconut in a small heavy skillet over low heat, stirring often until the coconut is golden and fragrant. Let cool.
2. Place the cashews and half the coconut in a food processor and process until the cashews are very finely ground and the coconut is almost powdered.
3. Add the finely chopped dates, orange zest, and cardamom. Process until everything comes together into a thick paste.
3. Form into 1-inch balls and roll each in the remaining coconut.

Makes 12-18 small balls.