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Preparation Nourishing Meals for Cancer Patients Fosters Healthy Eating and Strengthens Social Connections

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Ceres Community Project’s mission is to “build healthy communities by restoring whole, local and organic food to its place as the foundation of health, and by creating heart-centered ways for people to connect to themselves, others and the earth.” The meals from Ceres help to prevent malnutrition so often associated with cancer treatments, improve quality of life, help strengthen social connections, educate clients about the role of a healthy diet, and support significant changes in eating habits.

Ceres Community Project began in a church kitchen in March 2007 with a simple idea: teach teens about cooking and eating healthy food by having them serve as volunteer chefs preparing nourishing meals for people dealing with cancer. Over the past seven years we’ve learned that the benefits for both the teens and the clients they cook for are profound and long-lasting.

Today, Ceres operates two kitchens in Sonoma County, California and a third in neighboring Marin County. During 2014, more than 400 teenagers will prepare 83,000 organic whole food meals for 550 cancer patients and their families. Interest in the model, called Healing Meals for Healthy Communities, is growing. Since 2010 Ceres Community Project has trained teams from 10 communities and we expect to train three more in 2014.

How the Program Started
The seed for Ceres Community Project, named after the Roman goddess of agriculture, began in July 2006 when a friend called asking if I could give her daughter a job over the summer and teach her how to cook. With no real way to do that, I designed a 7 week project to prepare meals for three people dealing with a health challenge — 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. Seventeen-year-old Megan and I met once a week, preparing 3 dinners, a soup and a healthy dessert for our “clients.” All of the food was organic and featured whole foods with lots of vegetables and pastured organic poultry or wild caught seafood. The recipients were deeply grateful for the gift of meals and Megan was gaining valuable skills in healthy eating and food preparation. But what tipped the scales and inspired me to take the idea bigger was watching Megan blossom as she real-

New clients such as Darlene, at left, receive a home visit from a trained volunteer Client Liaison. Jerliu is one of our dozens of Liaisons who also provide ongoing weekly phone support to each client.

Ceres Community Project operates programs in Sonoma and Marin counties in California and expects to launch programs in two additional Bay Area counties (Alameda and San Francisco) by the end of 2014.

Licensed Affiliate Projects include:
- Positive Community Cures, Eugene, Oregon
- Revive & Thrive, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Teen Kitchen Project, Santa Cruz, California

Ceres Inspired Projects include:
- Pathways Cooks, Summit, New Jersey
- The Bay Village Project, Bay Village, Ohio
- Meals 2 Heal, Nashville, Tennessee
- Fox Valley Food for Health, Geneva, Illinois
- Food of Love, St. Helena, California
ized the difference she was making in these people's lives.

With $12,500 in funding Ceres Community Project officially launched in March 2007 with six teens cooking for four families in a donated church kitchen. Today, Ceres is headquartered in a 3,000 square foot remodeled facility in Sebastopol, California. The building includes a 1,200 square foot commercial kitchen, the home of our largest program which will provide nearly 70,000 meals in 2014. We also operate a three-quarter acre food production garden on donated land about a mile away. Teens are also responsible for all aspects of the garden, from preparing beds to harvesting.

**Healing Food and Community Connections as the Foundation of Health**

Ceres Community Project's mission is to “build healthy communities by restoring whole, local and organic food to its place as the foundation of health, and by creating heart-centered ways for people to connect to themselves, others and the earth.” At Ceres we believe - and research supports us - that the true generators of wellness are our connections to healthy food and a healthy food system, and our relationships with one another.

Over the past fifty years there has been a fundamental shift in our diets, away from fresh whole foods cooked from scratch towards a much more highly processed diet often eaten alone and on the run. During the same period, there's been a breakdown in the fabric of social relationships. Fewer people live near their families, we stay at the same job for shorter and shorter periods of time, and informal social groups like bowling leagues and neighborhood gatherings have dropped dramatically. We know from a whole host of studies that social isolation is extremely detrimental for our well-being, both physically and emotionally.

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Ceres’ signature Immune Broth provides a mineral-rich base for our soups and stews and is also available as a “Ceres Extra” for clients with limited appetite.

Sunny Beet Burgers are a high-protein vegetarian favorite of Ceres Community Project's clients and Teen Chefs

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ly. 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 we feel good, and then when we get sick, the doctor will fix us.

These trends have gotten us into a lot of trouble. More than 40% of Americans are now obese, nearly triple the number just 40 years ago. And 53% of all deaths in the U.S. have poor nutrition and overweight as a precipitating cause. The American Cancer Society says that as many as 50% of all cancers could be avoided by changes in diet and maintaining a healthy weight. Nearly 26 million Americans are diabetic, and another 79 million are pre-diabetic.

**Healing Meals for Healthy Communities**

is an innovative and simple to implement model that integrates nourishing support to people facing cancer, education about healthy eating, youth development and community building into a simple but profound model for revitalizing the health of people and communities. In Michael Lemon’s words (a member of Ceres’ National Ambassador Council and co-founder of Commonweal and the Cancer Help Program), “Ceres Community Project is one of the most beautiful inventions in the field of cancer care that I’ve seen. Nourishing meals prepared and shared with love. Involving teens and teaching them not only healthy eating but even more important the power of service. And engaging the whole community so everyone becomes healthier and more connected. Every community needs a Ceres Project.”

The program includes these core elements:

- Supporting individuals dealing with cancer and other serious illnesses with free, delivered and nutrient-rich prepared meals, nutrition education, and a community of caring.
- Engaging young people as volunteer gardeners and chefs, giving them direct, hands-on experience of the difference that fresh, healthy foods and community make, building life and work-ready skills, and developing their leadership in the community.
- Educating the broader community, including health professionals, about the connection between fresh, healthy food, strong social networks, healing and wellness.
- Connecting people of all ages and from all walks of life to one another, and to their value as an integral part of the community.

Ceres' approach focuses on getting as many people involved as possible, knowing that each person will benefit from being connected in what we call “heart-centered ways” with others, and will also both learn about healthy eating and carry that message into the community. In 2013, more than 400 adult volunteers donated 18,000 hours of services and Ceres received food and other in-kind donations from hundreds of farmers, food producers, grocery stores and other businesses.

**When Every Bite Counts: Beautiful, Delicious & Nourishing Meals**

At Ceres we say that the food needs to be beautiful, delicious and nourishing. If it’s not beautiful, clients might not even try it. If it’s not delicious, they won’t keep eating it. And it’s not nourishing, they shouldn’t be eating it at all. With nearly 80% of cancer patients facing malnutrition at some point during treatment, making every bite count is a priority.

Ceres Community Project meals are made from 100% organic ingredients with a premium on vegetables, mushrooms, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and sea vegetables along with about 10 ounces per person per week of organic pasture raised poultry and wild caught seafood. Foods are prepared with organic olive oil, organic coconut oil or organic butter, and sweeteners are limited to organic grade B maple syrup, local organic honey, rapidura or fruit. We do not use any white flour, white sugar or packaged foods. All beans and grains are soaked with apple cider vinegar to improve digestibility and we soak, sprout and dehydrate all nuts and seeds prior to using for the same reason.

Each week’s delivery includes 4 complete dinners, a soup, a salad and a healthy dessert for each person in the family (see sample menus in Side Bar on page 31). As might be expected, our clients come
Ceres Community Project’s menu changes weekly and features seasonal, organic ingredients, locally grown wherever possible. Here are two samples of what the group provides to a client on a weekly basis:

- Chicken (or Tempeh) Marbella, Mushroom Barley Pilaf, Broccoli
- Miso Glazed Sea Bass, Buckwheat Soba Noodles, Cabbage, Carrot and Arame Sauté
- Cauliflower Pie with Potato Crust, Greens and Carrots
- Mushroom Ragout with Polenta and Sauteed Brussels sprouts
- Roasted Pepper and Tomato Soup
- Creamy Split Peas Soup with Lemon and Thyme
- Crimson Beet Salad with Oranges and Fennel
- Almond Dream Cookies with Orange and Cardamom
- Turkey Meatloaf with Apples and Sage, Mashed Winter Vegetables, Greens
- Cranberry Thyme Crusted Salmon, Roasted Yams, Broccoli
- Sunny Beet and Carrot Burgers with Miso Tahini Sauce, Potato Cucumber Salad
- Broccoli, Kale and Caramelized Onion Frittata with Herbed Carrots
- Garbanzo Bean Soup with Saffron
- Carrot Ginger Soup with Cashew Cream
- Kale and Arame Salad
- Rice Pudding with Apples and Raisins

form during our home visit and to place orders for these products. Ceres Extras include:

- Immune Broth (either prepared or all ingredients packaged so that the client can add water and prepare) – a combination of vegetables along with reishi mushrooms, codonopsis root, astragalus and kombu sea vegetables.
- Vital Bites – a sprouted coconut almond butter base with cocoa powder and seven adaptogenic herbs including eleuthero, ashwagandha, licorice, turmeric, and Tri-Mycogen, a combination of reishi, shiitake and cordyceps mushrooms.
- Smooth Mix – a combination of very high quality whey or rice powder with ashwagandha, Vitamin Green and lecithin.
- Fresh Ginger Glycerite for nausea
- Nori Nettle Spice Blend – a combination of nori sea vegetable, seeds, medicinal herbs and culinary spices that can be used to season food
- Sauerkraut which we make weekly
- Goat kefir donated by Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery

Ceres' staff includes a certified Nutrition Consultant and we also maintain a Nutrition Advisory Board that we consult with regarding the meals we provide and their Ceres’ Extra. Members of the Advisory Board include Dr. Nan Fuchs, PhD in Nutrition; Rebecca Katz, M.S. in Nutrition, a core faculty member for the Food as Medicine Conference, and author of two books on nutrition and cooking for cancer patients — One Bite at a Time and The Cancer Fighting Kitchen; and Lili Mazzarella, M.S., a Clinical Herbalist and Nutrition Counselor.

How it Works: Client Support During Cancer Treatment

Potential clients are referred from all major hospitals and oncology practices in our area, as well as from federally qualified health centers, social workers, and of course word of mouth from past and current clients. Because our capacity is currently limited to 120 client families in two counties, our intake conversation covers the client's diagnosis, treatment plan, financial means, support system and their openness to the type of food that we offer. Based on that, our Client Manager prioritizes clients as openings arise. We add 35 to 40 clients to the service each month and complete about the same number.

Once the client is accepted into the program, he or she is also assigned to a volunteer Client Liaison who then schedules a home visit. The home visit allows the Liaison to meet the client, establish a relationship, better understand the client's living situation, and to review the program carefully with the client to make sure he or she understands how the service works and what their options are in terms of the food and Ceres Extras. Following the home visit,
foods are important for them, and ask them if they are willing to give these foods a try. The Client Liaison follows up with a fuller conversation during the home visit and our New Client Packet includes information about Ceres’ food philosophy, the American Cancer Society’s Nutrition for the Cancer Patient pamphlet, and by the second half of 2014 a 30 minute DVD called Healing Foods Basics. Each week’s food delivery also includes a one page Nutrition Tip talking about the benefits of things like greens, quinoa, sea vegetables, healthy fats and more. Clients come to Ceres with a wide range of eating habits, from heavy fast food and “meat and potatoes” people to those who consider their current diet “pretty healthy”. Our goal is to have the food we provide be accessible to the widest range of people without compromising our commitment to provide the highest quality nutrition that we can. Happily about 95% of those who start the program discover that they enjoy the food.

What Difference Does it Make for Clients?
The meals from Ceres help to prevent malnutrition so often associated with cancer treatments, improve quality of life, help strengthen social connections, educate clients about the role of a healthy diet, and support significant changes in eating habits. Preliminary results from a 2 ½ year program evaluation study funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that receiving meals leads to significant positive benefits for clients. All new clients complete a survey about their diets and cooking behavior. Clients who are well enough (about half the original group) are surveyed again 3 months after completing the meal service. Highlights include:

- 100% of clients say that the food they received was extremely important to their healing.
- 83% said that what they learned about healthy eating was extremely important to them.
- 62% said that the service was extremely important in helping them feel less isolated.
- Clients increased fruit consumption by 33% and vegetable consumption by 39%, and the percentage saying they eat at least 3 servings of vegetables increased from 55% at intake to 88% in the follow-up.
- Between 77% and 81% of clients said that they had reduced their consumption of fast food, processed food and white flour products.
- 82% of clients reported that their weight moved in a positive direction as a result of the meals.

Here’s how one client described the impact of the program:

“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...”

In Ceres’ Sebastopol, CA kitchen, volunteer Teen Chefs prepared and packaged nearly 60,000 fresh, organic whole foods meals in 2013 to support individuals and families facing cancer or another serious illness.
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. — Past client Claire Victor

How it Works: Youth Development & Healthy Eating

All of the meals that we provide are prepared by young people ages 14 to 22 who serve as the program’s volunteer gardeners and chefs. Youth in the program come from more than 50 schools in Sonoma County and include teens in and transitioning out of foster care, developmentally and learning disabled youth and those in institutional high schools as well as young people considered high functioning. All ethnic and socio-economic groups are represented. We ask youth to make a minimum three month commitment to the program and to work at least 3 hours each week. The average teen is active for 10 months and many teens are involved for several years or longer.

Each day’s shift in the garden and kitchen includes a ½ hour devoted to an educational program. The year-long curriculum covers nutrition and the link between food and health; broader food system issues including why eat local, hunger and food insecurity, and organics and sustainability; teamwork and leadership; making healthy choices including stress management and active living; and exploring and reflecting on values. Every ten weeks clients visit to share their stories, meet the teens and thank them directly for the difference they are making.

Ceres’ Teen Leader program recognizes youth who have served more than 50 hours with a Ceres Project apron with their name embroidered. Youth who have been active for at least a year and who have met specified criteria related to their competence and leadership in the kitchen are invited to become Teen Leaders. These teens receive chef coats with their names embroidered and play an active role in the management of the program including speaking at monthly Volunteer Orientations, orienting new teens to the program, leading the preparation or packaging of a dish, and modeling the Ceres culture. These teens participate in an ongoing leadership development program including every other month trainings.

What Difference Does it Make for Teens?

Ceres’ Teen Program supports young people in making the transition to a healthy, engaged and productive adulthood. The teen years are a rich time in which young people explore who they are, who they want to be, and how they “fit”. It’s also a critical time for them to establish healthy behaviors and to gain skills they will carry forward throughout their lives. Ceres has given young people an opportunity to learn life and work skills, to develop their leadership, and to experience being valued and contributing members of the community. Our Teen Program supports 32 of the 40 “developmental assets” outlined in the Search Institute’s nationally recognized youth development framework.

Results from the US Department of Agriculture funded study also show significant positive benefits for youth. Teens are surveyed when they enter the program and again after about six months. Some highlights include:

- The percentage of teens who report cooking at home at least once a week increases from 65% to 84%.
- 100% of teens say they feel confident that they could prepare a healthy meal from scratch.
- The percentage of teens eating at least three servings of vegetables daily increases by 29% and the variety of vegetables the teens are eating increases by 11%.
- The percentage of teens who say they never or rarely eat fast food increases from 28% to 81%.
- There is a 50% increase in the number of teens who say that they encourage their friends and family to make healthier choices on a daily or frequent basis.

Along with these quantitative results are the individual stories we have of watching young people blossom, gaining self-confidence and self-esteem and becoming passionate about making a difference in the world around them. Numerous Ceres teens have gone on to study culinary arts, nutrition and whole foods cooking, public health, food systems, sustainable agriculture and community medicine. Here’s a quote from Teen Leader Sonya Dexter’s college essay which she titled “The Web of
Love”. Sonya, who has known she wanted to be a doctor since third grade is now planning to study public health and community medicine.

One way I share lessons of empowerment with other teens is through telling my own story. I, a seventeen-year old girl, have the ability to change the world. My work at Ceres touches the lives of an incredible number of people through something we call the “Butterfly Effect.” In cooking food for people, I give them my love and support and they in turn pass on that love to everyone they come in contact with. To be seventeen and sit at the center of this web of love is an incredible thing.

Some of the most empowering moments we have at Ceres are during client visits. On a rainy December day, an elderly woman hobbled into the kitchen wheeling her oxygen tank behind her. Between wheezing breaths, she looked every teen in the eye and then said, “You are my guardian angels. You have saved my life.” I was only fourteen but those few words were so incredibly powerful. When I heard them, I realized that I can make a difference in my community.

The Silver Lining
As one of our clients said so clearly recently, “having cancer sucks.” In the midst of one of the most challenging experiences in life, Ceres Community Project is for many the silver lining. Each week a volunteer delivers Angel bags of yummy and nourishing meals prepared with love by chefs of their choice. “The fact that hundreds of people that I don’t even know – especially teenagers – have made this happen for me... it feels like the whole community cares,” a client told us.

Those meals provide nutrition that is vitally important to helping clients manage their cancer treatments and recover more quickly. At the same time the meals give clients a chance to become familiar with healthy whole foods, and realize that these foods can taste great and help them feel better. The result – healthier eating habits that will, we hope, last a lifetime. And through it all, young people are learning about the vital connection between what they eat and their health, gaining skills in cooking and preparing whole foods, developing self-confidence and self-esteem, and becoming advocates for healthy choices.

Ceres Community Project’s Healthy Meals for Healthy Communities Program is a simple but powerful tool for strengthening community connections and improving eating habits – together two of the most important factors improving health outcomes.

For more information, please visit www.ceresproject.org or email Cathryn@ceresproject.org. You can watch an 8 minute video about the program and see our teen gardeners and chefs in action at http://www.ceresproject.org/video/Ceres-Video2013.html.

Cathryn Couch, MBA
Cathryn Couch has an M.B.A. from the University of Michigan and began her career as a Director of Marketing Research and then a marketing and marketing research consultant primarily in the banking and financial services field. She served as the Director of Communications for The Hunger Project’s US operations from 1987 to 1991, and then founded a gourmet organic home delivered meal service which she ran for 10 years. She launched Ceres Community Project in March of 2007 and has served as the organization’s executive director. In 2012 Cathryn received a Silver Jefferson Award for Public Service, one of only 5 awarded in the San Francisco Bay region, was a national finalist for The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Community Health Leaders Award, and was named one of fourteen Innovative Nonprofit Leaders in Sonoma County. In 2013 she received the Leader in Sustainability Award from the Leadership Institute for Ecology and the Economy.