

Success Story: Mobile Nutrition Classroom

Creativity & Resilience Keep Nutrition Education Alive in Milwaukee



Milwaukee's Mobile Nutrition Classroom is one of those projects. When you first hear of it, you can't believe you've never encountered the idea before: the need it fills is obvious and the execution is creative and thoughtful.

The Mobile Nutrition Classroom is, in essence, exactly what it sounds like – a food truck that travels to urban gardens and classrooms, teaching students and families how to think about and prepare healthy and varied foods. The program was started, thanks to an Innovation Grant focusing on health disparities in the inner city, by Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) professor Heidi Katte. MATC students enrolled in a food service manager class taught through the mobile classroom. This service learning opportunity was especially meaningful because many of the MATC students grew up in the very communities that the mobile classroom served.



The Mobile Nutrition Classroom's pilot year partnered the program with the Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization Groundwork. Food preparation lessons focused on teaching young urban gardeners how to prepare the produce that they would harvest from their gardens. In the second year, the program expanded to link the mobile classroom with high school classes. "We identify what the needs are in communities and see how we can fit in," explains Katte. "Nutrition is such a key part of maintaining healthy lives."

The program makes an effort to focus lessons on what local communities are growing in their gardens, catering to the cultural tastes of the students. Last year, for example, a lesson at one of the seven sites the mobile classroom visited included preparing "Not your average nachos" – with bell peppers, pinto beans, green onion, cilantro, mushrooms, and salsa.

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Sometimes, the activities even go beyond traditional nutrition education. Last year, the Mobile Nutrition Classroom worked with (and learned from) the Hunger Taskforce Farm, giving Milwaukee Public School students the opportunity to do some harvesting and planting of their own, providing a fuller farm-to-fork experience.

“Our lessons were really dependent on what the community needed and what groups we were able to connect with,” said Katte. “There’s a need for nutrition education in the community. And going into the community, learning from the community, it can be such a richer experience than me lecturing in a classroom. It’s a special thing – technical college students connecting with their own community members, seeing that they’re really making a difference. It’s the experience they need to foster the passion that ignites their drive to want to work in the field.”



Yet, it takes more than community needs to keep a project going. The end of the grant period meant no more resources to purchase the food and other materials that the lessons require. The mobile classroom was additionally limited by the schedules of the MATC students who were conducting the lessons, making the program most active during months that did not line up with southern Wisconsin’s growing season.

As so many practitioners of nutrition and garden-based education can attest, even the most practical and innovative of projects can require a willingness to re-conceptualize.

And that’s just what Katte did. Although the project has evolved from its

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initial mission of providing nutrition and food preparation education to Milwaukee's urban gardeners, Katte and her students are still working towards the broader goal of bringing nutrition awareness to Milwaukee communities.

The Milwaukee Public Museum requested Katte and her students give live presentations in their newest traveling exhibit, Global Kitchen: Food, Nature, and Culture. Free with admission to the exhibit, visitors can observe MATC students in the exhibit's demonstration kitchen, preparing food on the themes of "colorful eating" (March 9), "breads and grains" (April 27), and "the benefits of chocolate" (May 10). You can find more information about these live demonstrations here.



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