A Carrot Grows in the Bronx

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By Stephanie Alvarado

One day more than seven years ago, just before I began studying to become a nutritionist, a former co-worker excitedly offered me some carrots from her local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). In simple terms, a CSA enables people in urban areas to buy a "share" of produce grown by local farmers. I thought her enthusiasm was a little strange. "A carrot is a carrot," I told her. "Who cares if it's from a CSA?" Eager for me to try them she said, "No! It is so not the same, Stephanie." When I saw the bunch of carrots I said "Ew, what a mess. All that green stuff sticking out of it." In my experience, carrots were always cute, bright, orange baby carrots in a bag. When I learned that this is how carrots actually looked when picked from the ground I was surprised. That is not how you find carrots in our hometown of the Bronx.

I wondered where she'd bought her produce, since there surely weren't any farms in our neighborhood. I realized that if I wanted to study nutrition, I'd have a lot to learn. I didn't even know what real produce looked like, much less how it benefits the body. I needed a better connection with food, and thinking about that began to bring up some childhood memories.

Sunday dinners at my grandmother's house were memorable not only because the food was delicious, but also because it was a bonding experience--with both family and food. My grandmother prepared her meals attentively. She understood the ingredients she was using and instinctively knew how to cook them. She connected with food. My grandmother grew up in

small mountain town in Puerto Rico, and she cooked with produce and herbs grown in her own backyard and locally in town. She brought this relationship with food to the United States in the 1940s and maintained the traditions because it was all she knew.

My relationship with food was the exact opposite. A product of my environment, food translated to value menus, drive-thrus or anything quick and cheap. There was a clear disconnect. Reminiscing about those Sunday dinners made me realize that I was missing out. So I slowly began to try different fruits, vegetables and herbs at farmers' markets, and I've become more comfortable using them. I've learned to bond with food--literally. Slowing down and taking the time to pick the best tomato or variety of basil is enlightening, and for me at least, also therapeutic.

Today, as a Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables (JSY) nutritionist at Food Bank For New York City, I am grateful to now share this knowledge with my fellow New Yorkers who struggle with the same challenges, lack of knowledge and access to fresh produce as I once did. Our JSY workshop participants learn about the benefits of local produce and taste low-cost recipes using various vegetables. They also learn about farmers' market locations in their neighborhood, where they can find local produce. This past year we were also able to give folks Health Bucks, $2 vouchers provided by the NYC Department of Health that are redeemable for fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets. The most rewarding part for me has been the positive reaction when someone tries a new vegetable for the first time and says, "This is delicious; I'm going to try it for dinner tonight." Now that's inspiring!

The good news is that urban farms are sprouting up all over the Bronx. The next step on this journey for me is gardening. In a concrete jungle, picking your own produce is not really common. But as a foodie, growing my own fruits and veggies is the ultimate goal. And, of course, sharing the knowledge with my fellow New Yorkers.

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