

Reviving the Bronx, One Workshop At a Time

Posted At : June 19, 2013 4:39 PM | Posted By : Food Bank Staff

Related Categories: Nutrition & Food



by Stephanie Alvarado

When I read in a New York Times article that the Bronx, my hometown, was rated as the unhealthiest county in New York State my heart sank. While the news was extremely unsettling for me, it intensified the fire in me to continue my journey of providing nutrition education to my fellow Bronxites.

Growing up in the Bronx with a single mom and two sisters, my family and I struggled financially. For the most part we relied on food stamps and WIC for food. Our meals consisted of mainly rice and beans or plantains; they were cheap and kept us full. My mother juggled two jobs, so she also relied on fast-food restaurants to keep us fed since they were inexpensive and convenient. As a teen, I struggled with weight issues and my neighborhood didn't help. It actually made things worse. I was bombarded with corner-store bodegas and fast-food places all serving unhealthy food. I asked my doctor what I could do to lose weight and he recommended a book that introduced me to nutrition. I began researching food and how it affects your health. I was eager to learn more and wanted to share all my newfound information with everyone I knew. The correlation between a lack of healthy food in low-income areas and a high incidence of diet-related diseases suddenly made sense and it troubled me. I'd found my calling and decided to study Community Health and Nutrition in college.

Nutrition education is imperative in communities like the Bronx that lack resources. People need to know that they have nutritional options; they don't have to succumb to the unhealthy food choices surrounding them. Working for Food Bank For New York City as a Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables (JSY) nutritionist is truly a privilege because I'm able to deliver this vital information in low-income areas where it is most needed. Addressing hunger and nutrition education go hand in hand. As a JSY nutritionist, I conduct nutrition workshops and healthy cooking demonstrations at Food Bank's network of food pantries and soup kitchens. Because I have been confronted with the same issues as the people I teach, I'm able to relate to the obstacles they may face in trying to lead a healthier lifestyle. That makes hearing a warm "Thank you" or "I learned something new today" at the end of a workshop all the more rewarding.

In retrospect, I wonder if I, my family and my Bronx neighbors would have made healthier food choices if we'd been educated on nutrition and had healthy options readily available? It's my belief that we should at least have the right to make an educated choice. The Bronx has a long road ahead in terms of becoming a healthy place to live; nevertheless, I have happily witnessed improvements! When I began studying Nutrition at Bronx Community College, I recall walking up Burnside Avenue daily and seeing kids coming in and out of the countless fast-food chain restaurants that line the street, as I once did as a child. Fast forward six years: on that same avenue now sits a NYC Green cart stand that offers low-cost produce and accepts SNAP benefits (food stamps). A few blocks away, a Farmer's Market now runs from July through November, providing local seasonal produce and cooking demonstrations--right on the same street where I have started a JSY nutrition education series at the Davidson Community Center Food Pantry. Someone is listening! I am

honored to be a part of this food movement and will continue my responsibility of reviving the Bronx, one workshop at a time.

Stephanie Alvarado is a Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables Nutritionist at Food Bank For New York City.