




IPEI Grant Helps First Graders Fight Hunger

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More than 60 South Hill Elementary School first graders received a surprise invitation this month to attend Ithaca's 25th Taste of the Nation, a gala fundraiser that has raised more than \$750,000 for local hunger and poverty relief services.

An Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Community Collaboration Grant titled 'Farm-to-Table: Healthy Food for All People' brought Jerry Dietz, chair of Share Our Strength's local Taste of the Nation event, to South Hill this month to discuss his volunteer work in the community. At the end of his talk, Dietz invited the three first-grade classes to join 'Team No Kid Hungry' and attend the June 17 event at Ithaca College. Their role will be to help raise money for the cause by selling their handmade trivets, bean soup kits, and recipe collections.

"Since Share Our Strength's focus is on ending childhood hunger, having the first graders attend Taste of the Nation and share what they have learned throughout this grant program plays out in a number of positive ways," Dietz said. "It is reinforcement and reward to the children for a job well done; it gives the adult attendees of Taste of the Nation the opportunity to see the impact this can have on young children; and, frankly, it underscores for everyone that this is just a good thing to do."

IPEI Community Collaboration Grants are awarded to not-for-profit organizations that partner with Ithaca City School District (ICSD) teachers to develop and implement curricular-enhancing programs. The "Farm-to-Table" grant, designed by first-grade teachers Nancy Marino, Kathleen White and Patti Caughey, is a yearlong, interdisciplinary approach to teaching students about farming and healthy food. The multi-layered curriculum involves every subject: reading, writing, social studies, math, science and physical education.

Dietz visit was timed after a social justice unit in which students studied Cesar Chavez's nonviolent fight for fair treatment of migrant farm workers. "We introduced the students to the character trait 'passion,'" said Marino. "After we studied the nationally-known Cesar Chavez, we wanted to bring in someone from our own community who is passionate about something important."

"Nancy has always been interested in the work I have done with Share Our Strength helping to mitigate hunger in our community," Dietz said. "I have always liked Share Our Strength's philosophy that 'everyone has a strength to share in the fight against hunger,' and when she contacted me last summer to tell me she had this idea to run a yearlong, integrated project on food, it really resonated with me."

In his presentation, Dietz shared his childhood love of bike riding and fishing and how these passions have impacted his life. "When I was your age, I would ride my bike by the stream every day of the summer and fish," he told the first graders. "I'd get bread from a little grocery store on the way to bait my hook. I used my bike to do so many other things, too, like ride to a field to play baseball or go to friends' houses. I've been passionate about bike-riding since I learned to ride without training wheels."



Jerry Dietz

Dietz explained that when he was growing up in the 1960s, processed foods were the norm. "I didn't have a lot of exposure to fresh food," he said. "It was often out of a can. I had a very different diet and way of eating."

After moving to Ithaca in the early 1970s, Dietz became more interested in food and hunger after opening two local restaurants. "In owning restaurants, I learned a lot about food," he told the first graders. "I found feeding hungry people was a lot of fun. I also realized that there were people who were hungry who didn't have food."

This led him to volunteer with Share Our Strength. And, later, his longtime love of bike-riding inspired him to become co-founder of the Southern Tier AIDS Program's AIDS Ride for Life, which has raised more than \$2.7 million for local HIV/AIDS services over the last 15 years. "That's what I did with my passion for cycling," he said. "We have helped a very important organization do very important work."

"He helps make Ithaca the wonderful place to live in that it is," Marino told the students.

In addition to Dietz's visit, the IPEI grant allowed first-graders to visit Cornell Orchards and prepare team presentations on apples using a variety of mediums including video, songs, skits and board games. The classes also received visits from an Ithaca College art historian who studies the importance of corn in Mayan culture, and a local beekeeper who taught students how to make lip balm. Other activities in the "Farm-To-Table" program include field trips to a dairy farm and bean farm, a presentation by a local corn tortilla factory owner, and workshops with a Cornell Cooperative Extension master gardener. The program will culminate in the spring with the planting of a small garden supervised by Lehman Alternative Community School (LACS) students in the Youth Farm Project.

"If you have this overarching theme, and it connects to math, physical education, and all the other subjects, it means so much more to the kids," Marino said. "It's been so rewarding. We couldn't have done it without IPEI."

"What Nancy, and the other first grade teachers have so successfully done is engage the first graders in that meaningful way that only a hands-on experience can provide," Dietz said. "That these children understand not only how a particular food is grown but also how it finds its way to the market and table is a very valuable lesson. The students are learning at a very young age the importance of nutritious food and how there are some people who do not have ready access to it."

"Hopefully, my visit offered the students another perspective on the scope of hunger in our community—how what they have been studying all year long could fit into a bigger picture solution to food insecurity," Dietz

added. "My hat goes off, yet again, to IPEI for recognizing the value of supporting these wonderfully inspiring collaborations in our schools."

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