

YOUR KEY TO AN AFFORDABLE HOME • RX WARNING: FOSTER KIDS ON DRUGS

CITY LIMITS

NEW YORK'S URBAN AFFAIRS NEWS MAGAZINE

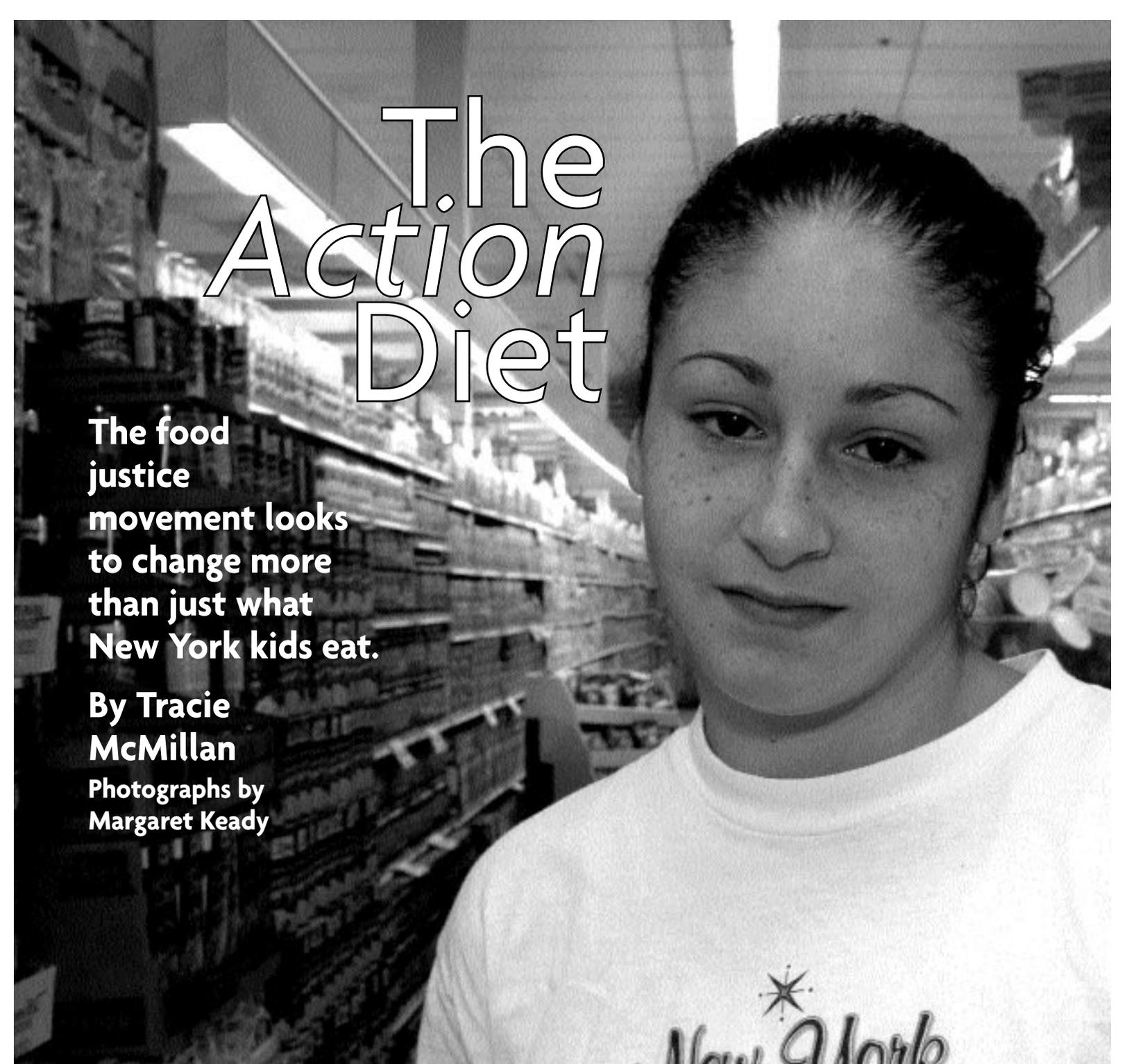


Beyond the Golden Arches

Healthy eating comes
to the 'hood.

Plus: How your nabe's
groceries stack up.

INSIDE:
THE HEALTH
COMMISH'S
SMOKING
BAN SEQUEL



The Action Diet

The food justice movement looks to change more than just what New York kids eat.

By Tracie McMillan

Photographs by Margaret Keady

“IT HAS A BUTT CRACK!”

Vanessa Santiago, 18 years old, giggles as she peers at the object of her glee: a garbanzo bean.

Tight jeans, a bomber jacket and a pink sweatband—Santiago doesn't look like the type of girl to contemplate the aesthetics of legumes. But on this cold Saturday morning, she has come from Bushwick to lower Manhattan to inspect a can of beans. Standing in the middle of a commercial kitchen, Santiago and a half-dozen other teenagers cluster around a steel table, a ragtag bunch of critics.

“This has a lot of sugar,” says Ronny Segura, 14, shaking his head disparagingly at a jar of sun-dried tomatoes. Segura and the other young chefs slowly move through the pile of food on the table. Is the food good? How can they tell? How much sugar is in it, and how much salt? Where did it

come from—another state, country? Is it in season? Is it in keeping with “ancestral tradition?” Does everyone remember what “organic” means?

Once they've trudged through their ingredients, the group springs into action. Ronny, a fan of Emeril on the Food Network, brandishes a knife, dicing onions. Vanessa eagerly minces garlic. Jimmy, a big kid from Chinatown, squeezes thawed spinach over the sink.

As the prep work drags on, kids begin to wander in and out, heading downstairs to the lobby of the youth services organization housing the project. Chris Williams strides into the kitchen with an Otis Spunkmeyer danish. The sugary smell catches Vanessa's attention; when she finishes chopping, she slips out and returns with two cookies, two Pop-Tarts, a cupcake and a handful of M&Ms. The two teachers exchange looks as the sugar count mounts, but say nothing.



In her neighborhood, Bushwick, Vanessa Santiago eats food from lots of boxes and cans—and Burger King.

That teenagers are devouring fat and sugar isn't shocking, but here it has a special irony. *These* teenagers aren't simply learning to cook. They're training to spread the word that healthy living—and healthy food in particular—isn't too expensive or too difficult. These kids are being primed to solve the obesity and health crisis among young people.

We possess far more information about the symptoms of the American obesity epidemic than we do working ideas for how to stop it. Obesity is, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, rapidly gaining on tobacco as the country's number-one cause of death. Its correlation with heart disease and diabetes is well known; those two combined killed 26,000 New Yorkers in 2002. Obesity is also linked to several cancers and asthma. And its

impact on kids has been perhaps the most chilling: Already, one in three born in 2000 is at risk of developing type 2 diabetes, according to the CDC. In New York City public elementary schools, one in four children is obese, and nearly as many are overweight.

The situation is most severe in poorer urban communities that share grim common denominators. There's an overabundance of fast food. Supermarkets are sparsely located and many stock mediocre and expensive produce. Public recreational space is not only scarce but shrinking; schoolchildren have lost significant playground real estate to portable classrooms. Physical education is mandatory in New York State public schools, but precious little class time is actually spent engaged in physical activity. Where there are parks, many are still not safe to ramble in.

Beyond the infrastructural obstacles lay the practical ones. How to cook healthy meals on low budgets and in short spurts of time, while pleasing the palates of children. There are deeply ingrained cultural habits surrounding food—using lard, heavily salting dishes, deep-frying—that have been passed down for generations within families. And we all know one reason kids can't stay away from fast food: The marketing juggernaut is inescapable.

The problem's complexity may be why the city Department of Health declined to include obesity in its ambitious 10-point "Take Care New York" health improvement plan, released this spring. City officials defended its omission by arguing that science has yet to find a clear-cut solution. "We don't currently have an obesity prevention program per se," admits Candace Young, an assistant director of prevention in the department's Diabetes Prevention unit, which was founded in late 2002. Instead, obesity and diabetes are both subsumed under point number three, reducing heart disease. Most related programs are centered in local organizations—hospitals, clinics, churches—and perform a combination of assessment, education and direct service. "We try to work as much as we can to improve institutions," says Young.

Bryant Terry is more interested in putting young people themselves in the driver's seat. Two years ago, Terry founded B*Healthy, the organization that's teaching Vanessa and Ronny how to cook. His plan: Get kids in the kitchen, grab their attention with cooking, and start to talk to them about food—what's healthy, why certain foods are available instead of others, and what's marketed to them. "That's where you get the buy-in," says Terry. "You have to couple education with getting young people involved in the preparation of foods."

Every other Saturday, the class converges on the kitchen at the Door, the youth services agency that houses the program, to cook a meal. Those lessons are supplemented with weekly classes on a variety of food- and health-related topics: body image, food marketing, how to select good produce, when different vegetables are in season, yoga sessions. Bringing together hippified organic cuisine, the Black Health movement, sustainable agriculture, and urban youth culture sensibilities, B*Healthy's goal is both simple and immense: to cultivate a cadre of young people with a sophisticated understanding of food and nutrition, and who can go out and spread the word. "This information is a lot more palatable coming from a young person," says Terry. He hopes to eventually have his students run workshops at after-school programs, at conferences, in front of health and home-ec classes—anyplace where young people gather to learn. Terry has supersize ambitions. "I like to think that we're training future food activists," he rhapsodizes—leaders who will eventually transform the ways their communities consume food. "I brand them as trailblazers and revolutionaries, because the effort they're putting in this is going to be commonplace in 20 years."

B*Healthy is unique in New York, but it is part of a "food justice"

Supermarkets

Why we don't have more of them.



In the battle against the bulge, easy access to a wide range of quality, healthy food is front and center. Supermarkets as a rule carry more healthy food than smaller stores, and consumers will eat it: A 2002 study found that for each additional supermarket located in a census tract, fruit and vegetable consumption increased by as much as 32 percent.

But as millions of New Yorkers know, finding decent produce and other healthy food is often easier said than done. That's true across the country as well: The wealthiest neighborhoods have more than three times as many supermarkets as the poorest ones, according to a 2001 study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

The same study found the gap is even wider along racial lines, with white neighborhoods having as many as four times the number of supermarkets as black ones.

By the early 1990s, the situation was so dire that the Local Initiatives Support Corporation started a subsidiary, the Retail Initiative, to step in where private developers feared to tread: developing urban supermarkets. Even when financing has been available, attempts to close the gap and get fresh food to greater numbers of poor consumers in New York City have been frustrated by two things: Costs are too high, and revenue is too low. The profit margin in the supermarket business is extremely small—about 1 percent.

"It's tough to get high quality supermarkets into the 'hood," says Alicia Glenn, vice president of Goldman Sachs Urban Investment Group, which is participating in a federal incentive program to spur commercial enterprises in low-income areas. To turn a profit, supermarkets must move large volumes of goods. To really make the numbers work, says Glenn, "You need ground-floor, large-scale development, something that's half a city block." And in New York, stores of that scale have to be built from the ground up.

Community development groups have helped lead the charge to bring supermarkets into urban areas. Pathmark's Newark development is widely cited as a model for community supermarket development, as is the central Brooklyn Pathmark developed with Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration. Of eight supermarkets developed through the Retail Initiative, six were done with CDCs.

Not every partnership is successful. With the Retail Initiative's help, the community development corporation Mid-Bronx Desperadoes (MBD) broke ground on a commercial project near Crotona Park boasting a Pathmark supermarket as its anchor tenant. MBD was an experienced housing developer, and the project was its first foray into serious retail development. According to a developer associated with the project, that made for a bumpy ride. The original contractor's work was deeply flawed, delaying the project—originally set to debut in 2002, the supermarket still has not opened. "It's one thing to renovate an existing building. New construction is a new animal," the developer says. "It would've been probably easier if they'd partnered with a private sector group to develop that site."

There are logistical challenges unique to urban areas: restrictive zoning, parking shortages, proximity to public transportation, traffic congestion. Community opposition to chain retailers is also common. When Pathmark partnered with Abyssinian Development Corporation and the Retail Initiative to develop its mammoth Harlem store, smaller local grocers organized opposition to the project, arguing that Pathmark would put them out of business. The ensuing battle delayed the project for two years, and ultimately led the mayor to reduce city financing available to the project before it finally opened in 1999.

The feds have stepped in to make the going easier. Looking to entice businesses to locate in high-poverty census tracts, the Clinton administration launched the New Markets Tax Credit in late 2000, offering developers financial incentives. Still in its early stages, the program has left some developers skeptical that it will do much to generate new retail development. "It sweetens the deal," says the adviser on the Bronx Pathmark. But unlike the Low Income Housing Tax Credit, which has helped produce millions of new homes, "it's probably not going to make or break a deal."

Yet some previously underserved areas are seeing a surge in supermarket development. The force bringing in the new stores is also a mixed blessing for poor communities: the boom of high-priced housing in formerly marginal areas. "Some of the retailers are still scared of these neighborhoods," says Glenn. "But we have to get high-quality grocery stores, because why else are people going to buy these condos?" —TM

movement that is thriving on the West Coast. In Oakland, California, the People's Grocery trawls neighborhood streets in a converted milk truck outfitted with a booming solar-powered stereo, selling affordable produce out its back. Also in the Bay Area, Edible Schoolyard, created by celebrity chef Alice Waters, couples a student-run organic garden with cooking classes at a Berkeley middle school; it's now slated to expand to the entire district. Along with grassroots activism, California has a strong commitment to developing a public policy framework for food and health activism: The Prevention Insti-



Ronny Segura joined B*Healthy because he loved Emeril, but never thought he'd become a healthy-city missionary.

tute, which gets funding from the sell-off of California's Blue Cross insurance nonprofit, has worked to address the problem of poor people's inadequate access to supermarkets.

What these efforts have in common is a founding premise that bulging waistlines and unhealthy living aren't just symptoms of an individual's lack of discipline, but of broader structural concerns: food access, consumer culture, lack of open space. And all of these organizations work with young people. They're betting that by starting kids on a path of healthier habits, they'll change not just

their immediate experience but their expectations as well. In a generation, these young people and their friends could generate a surge in consumer demand for better, healthier food. Healthy living—eating well, exercising regularly—could become a right, not a luxury.

Deep into Red Hook, an asphalt lot traced with the outlines of faded baseball diamonds gobbles up an entire block, ringed with chain link fencing. Inside sits one of Brooklyn's two working farms (the other is the Wyckoff Farm, which dates back to 1652).

A sunny spring Saturday finds a handful of teenagers crouching over three raised garden beds, digging shallow furrows and dispensing seeds into them. At the end of the beds, a greenhouse—built of heavy plastic stretched over aluminum tubing—holds another four young farmers, planting seeds in starter containers. Two of the farmers, Jasmine and Caridad, hail from B*Healthy and trekked here with their teachers to work with the organization that runs the farm, Added Value.

Ian Marvey never intended to be an agricultural missionary. He co-founded Added Value in 2000 based on a simple observation from his work with young offenders at the Red Hook Community Justice Center. These kids were working off their community service sentences by cultivating a community garden. To Marvey's surprise, many kept tending their plots even when they no longer had to. Seeing how passionate young people were about growing things, Marvey and a colleague, Michael Hurwitz, decided farming was a natural business enterprise for teenagers. When the neighborhood's only supermarket

closed down in 2001, the group opened a farmers' market across the street from the old store.

Marvey and Terry have brought their groups of kids together to learn from one another—to expand their view of how food is grown, sold and consumed, and to understand how their work is interconnected. It seems to be catching on. Denia Cuello, 15, of Added Value nods toward Jasmine as they both set seeds into starter pots. "The things that we plant, they cook," she says. "We grow organic food, and they cook organic food." Hurwitz explains to the young farmers and cooks that their simple acts mean much more than they may realize. "We're all trying to make sense of a world that doesn't always do things the right way," he counsels. "And we're trying to learn to do it in the right way."

Terry and Marvey both work hard to connect their kids with other food movement groups. This spring, Terry traveled to Boston with some of his students for workshops with the Food Project, an exchange program that

Farmers' Markets

Abundant, but still far from universally accessible.



David Gochfeld

Allyson Bennett is on a mission. "Alfred, you got my apples?" she calls out, marching purposefully to a farm stand in front of Brooklyn's Borough Hall. Bennett has trekked here from East New York on foot—the hike took her about two hours, she says—to purchase two boxes of Fuji apples from Wilklow Orchard, staffed this morning by Albert Wilklow, a sixth-generation farmer from upstate (Bennett, he laughs, never gets his name quite right). Bennett makes her purchase before heading to the chem lab at New York City Technical College, where she is a student. Recovering from a long illness, Bennett pursues a diet high in fruits and vegetables, with a special focus on fresh juice.

Though open-air markets like this one, nestled on a sunny plaza lined with gardens, connote bourgeois urban living, many of the city's 63 farmers' markets are vital conduits for bringing fresh produce into the kitchens of lower-income households. That's in large part due to two federal nutrition programs: WIC and food stamps.

The Women, Infant and Children program offers coupons for purchases at farmers' markets. Food stamps—which Bennett uses to pay for her apples—can also be used at some markets.

WIC coupons, distributed as part of the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), are widely considered a success. Redeemable only at farmers' markets, the coupons offer pregnant women and mothers of young children \$24 per season, in \$2 increments. This is virtually the only allotment for fresh produce under WIC. Nearly 90 percent of FMNP recipients in a 2002 survey said they would eat more fresh produce year-round because of the coupons; more than three-fifths said they used their own cash in addition to the coupons. For Wilklow, FMNP represents a significant amount of his sales at the city's farmers' markets, his primary outlet. "A good chunk of it is WIC," says Wilklow. "It does bring us a lot of business we wouldn't otherwise get."

Food stamps, however, are barely trickling into the farm stands. When New York eliminated the old coupons and switched to electronic benefit transfer cards in 2001, farmers didn't have the technology to process them. A few vendors at markets around the city have since joined a federally funded pilot program testing wireless terminals that can process the cards. But the prospects for expansion remain limited: Most people receiving food subsidies don't live near a year-round farmers' market [see "Where to Grab a Bite," p. 24-25] and don't have the time to make a trek. —TM

Community Supported Agriculture

Farmer co-ops put down fresh roots.

Genevieve Richards needs fresh vegetables. The home health aide, well into her fifties, has dangerously high cholesterol, and her doctor has her on a strict regimen of lean meats and veggies. But in East New York, where she has lived for 25 years, the produce available at the local market can be “kind of terrible,” laments Richards.

That’s why Richards chose to join the East New York Community Supported Agriculture Project (CSA). A group of consumers team up with a local farmer, paying for food up front and then collecting it weekly throughout the growing season.

In some ways, it’s an ideal model to bring quality food into low-income neighborhoods. CSAs are relatively easy to establish, capable of scraping by with a few committed volunteers and a church basement. They bring farm-fresh produce directly into the neighborhoods where people live, and charge about \$15 a week for a heap of food. But while they offer quality produce at low prices, CSAs have had to struggle to open up access for low-income members.

“In a traditional arrangement, you pay the farmer in January and you’re assured a share from June to November,” explains Ruth Katz, executive director of Just Food, a New York-based nonprofit that coordinates the city’s CSAs [see “Where to Grab a Bite,” p. 24-25] and advocates for a stronger local food distribution system. Because one household’s CSA share typically costs around \$350, Just Food has coordinated fundraising to subsidize low-income memberships, including grants from the New York Community Trust and United Way. Richards is a beneficiary: She gets a reduced price and pays for her food every other week, instead of a lump sum up front. Just Food has also learned how to do the paperwork to accept food stamps, which Katz says are now accepted at about half of the city’s CSAs. “That initially is kind of a pain for folks,” she concedes. “But once they do it, it’s done and people can use their food stamps.”

CSAs are part of a growing sustainable agriculture movement that argues for localized food production, building connections between farmers and consumers, and generally encouraging community built around wholesome food. As a CSA member, “You’re kind of forced to think about how to use what’s available,” says Sarita Saftary, a Just Food staffer who coordinates the East New York CSA. Saftary admits that some members have a hard time adjusting to simply taking whatever the farmer brings them, but that, she says, is part of the point: “It gives people a much stronger connection to agriculture and to the idea of not having whatever you want, whenever you want, in whatever quantity you want, at the expense of whatever else.”

At a recent cooking class held for the members of East New York’s CSA, the menu featured a salad of fruit and organic quinoa, oven-fried chicken with a red pepper coulis, and lacinato kale cooked with sun-dried tomatoes. The ingredients, confesses Saftary, were bought at the Park Slope Food Coop, six miles from East New York. “The preseason classes are to educate people about nutritious foods,” explains Saftary, “and to introduce them to foods they might not be familiar with. So it was a lot of stuff you can’t find in East New York.” Saftary notes there’s been talk among CSA members about trying to start a food co-op in East New York.

Richards is looking forward to the produce, but she’s also pleased with the focus on farming. “They have the agriculture thing, which I like—I grew up with that,” the Antigua native remarks. In the midst of cleanup before she sits down to her quinoa salad, Richards pauses at the sink. “Probably I can learn something too.” —TM

takes young urban gardeners to farms and brings rural youth to the city. Ronny Segura ran a workshop there asking the other kids to think critically about the way fast food is marketed to them. More B*Healthyites will go to Olympia, WA, this summer to attend a national conference of youth organizations working on food systems and sustainable agriculture. Piece by piece, the New York groups are trying to build local and national networks.

Funders see the potential, too. Since starting B*Healthy three years ago, Terry has been awarded the Open Society Institute’s Community Organizing Fellowship and won substantial support from the New York Foundation. Terry’s goal of encouraging healthier eating wasn’t what won him the grants; it was the fact that he intended to spark a movement. “Looking at food as a way to encourage social justice was brilliant,” says Alvin Starks, who was the program’s initial program officer at OSI. “The important piece to understand here is the organizing part. It’s not about whether Bryant parachutes in with ‘Eat this organic fruit!’ What Bryant has to do is challenge the cultural component of food, which in low-income communities can be very difficult because [unhealthy food] is affordable.”

Under Terry’s guidance, Theodora Rodriguez, a young mother, became enchanted with organic foods and healthy eating, and she helped him start a nutrition project for other mothers at the Door. She now works as a tutor for City Year, a service organization. When each volunteer in her program was given space to run a program for third-graders, one worker chose community, and another chose multiculturalism. Rodriguez chose nutrition.

Bryant is convinced that one reason B*Healthy alumni are carrying the healthy-diet message forward is that he never shoves it down their throats. He and the two teachers who help run the program avoid recommending very specific changes in habits and make clear that participants are welcome to heed or ignore their advice. “You have more likelihood of a person maintaining a healthy diet that works for them,” says Terry. “It has to be incremental steps.”

Terry’s laissez-faire philosophy stands in stark contrast to the Black Health movement. Black Health adherents promote vegetarian and organic diet choices as part of an extreme lifestyle change. Celebrities like rapper Common, singer Erykah Badu and entertainer Ben Vereen swear by the work of healers like Queen Afua, a holistic food and health icon based in Crown Heights. A strong advocate of vegetarian—and preferably liquid—diets, Afua says that she mostly works with adults who’ve encountered serious health problems and are looking to make a profound change in their diet. “I advocate that they become complete vegetarians, but of course everyone has a different level,” she concedes. “I meet them where they are and try to move them gradually to a more holistic lifestyle.”

Her public persona tends to be far more militant. At a community event held at Medgar Evers College last fall, an audience member asked Afua whether, as someone who was not willing to become vegetarian, it was worthwhile to switch to organic meats. “It will still kill you,” responded Afua tersely.

While Terry appreciates the longstanding contributions of healers like Afua, he’s not sold on the zero-tolerance approach. “Dude, how impractical and elitist is that?” he says. “It’s like saying, ‘Don’t go to school unless you go to an Ivy League college.’”

Following his students for a few months, one can see the changes in

Bryant Terry, center, brings his teen trainees into contact with other agricultural activists, including young urban farmers in Red Hook.



attitudes unfold. "I'm not going to change the way I eat," declared Ronny Segura, the Food Network fanatic, last October. "I'm just going to take a different view." Six months later, he's been eating more fruit and less fast food—just once a week by his estimate, and he's narrowed it down to french fries. While his mother still cooks mostly traditional Dominican foods—rice and beans, fried plantains—he's convinced her to switch to olive oil and favor herbs over salt.

For now, Terry has to accept that these incremental gains are the most he can expect to see. His kids can't decrease the sodium and fat content in their school meals, make their local parks safer, or open a supermarket. "I've been thinking about how city government might be involved with that," he muses.

After sitting on the sidelines while the bad news about food and health kept mounting, government is finally beginning to wake up to the high stakes of how people eat. Medical costs stemming from obesity have ballooned to an estimated \$75 billion nationwide, about half of which is borne by public spending through Medicaid and Medicare.



New York tops out state Medicaid spending on obesity at \$3.5 billion.

Last fall, Governor Pataki signed into law Childhood Obesity Prevention legislation. It calls for a comprehensive program to combat the problem, coordinating between local governments, schools, and health professionals to develop nutrition and physical activity programs. It also prescribes media campaigns to promote healthy lifestyles and establishes a unit to track health data and develop policies. But don't expect to see action anytime soon—there's no money in the state budget to fund any of this. (Assemblymember Felix Ortiz did try—he introduced a bill that would have imposed a 1 percent tax on junk food, video games and movie rentals.)

New York City government has been taking some initial steps. "Obesity is not rocket science," says the health department's Young. "The math is that people are taking in more calories than they are burning. A lot of this is about changing social norms and making physical

activity a part of people's lifestyles."

The department has two initiatives in full swing. One trains teachers in public schools, day care and after-school programs to keep kids moving—encouraging activities that involve every student, for example, instead of having 30 kids taking turns dribbling a ball. (Right now, 41 percent of the city's elementary schools do not even provide regular physical education classes to all their students, according to a 2000 report commissioned by the New York Community Trust.) A second, run through community health offices in low-income neighborhoods, sponsors family-friendly physical activity events in local parks.

On the food front, school lunch is getting an overhaul through a "School Food Revolution" announced in May by the Office of School Health. School meals are being reconfigured to lower fat and sodium, emphasize whole grains, vegetables, fish and plant-based proteins, and reduce processed food. Every student—not just poor ones—is now offered free breakfast, to ensure that they're eating right. The City Council has done its part, too, banning doughnuts, hard candy and soda from school vending machines (though cookies and potato chips—along with

"This is fast and easy to get to, and it fills you up," explains Vanessa as she stacks onion rings inside her Whopper's bun. Then she smothers it all in ketchup.

controversial Snapple juices—are still available).

Simply changing what's available worries Terry. "You have to couple education with that," he says—tangible, experiential learning. "If people aren't aware of the benefits of vegetables and whole grains, it doesn't matter. I don't think a lot of these young folks are aware of the impact of diet on their health."

The schools are just starting to get involved in the kind of hands-on teaching Terry promotes. The nonprofit Community Food Resource

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**Next Page: What's your neighborhood eating?
City Limits' map of food in the boroughs**

The Action Diet

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Center launched Cookshop, a program that teaches elementary-school students basic cooking skills and works with the school food office to bring the program to a wider audience.

But what does it take to spark a genuine turnaround in how kids eat? Vanessa Santiago is still figuring that one out. She is aware of the benefits of vegetables and whole grains. For the fall and winter, she regularly attended the B*Healthy classes, diligently participating in workshops about food selection, nutrition information, and food marketing and advertising. “I believe in the seasonal stuff,” she confides. “The way they take vegetables that aren’t even ready yet, and bring in stuff that’s not in season—it messes up the cycle of the way things should go.” And she’s making some adjustments to her diet, though perhaps not as intensively as her teachers might like.

On a frigid Saturday in February, Vanessa steps out of her grandparents’ Bushwick apartment and heads to Burger King. “This is fast and easy to get to, and it fills you up,” she explains, opening her Whopper’s bun to stack onion rings inside before smothering it with ketchup. After

a few bites, she begins to crack open the half-dozen creamers she scooped up from the condiments island, squirting their contents into her mouth, washing it all down with Hi-C lemonade. The entire meal, costing less than \$6, was in her hands in less than a minute; when she’s short on cash, she’ll head for the dollar menu. She concedes that there are ways to eat healthy—there’s always rice and beans, or apples and bananas—but it’s hard for her to resist the lure of burgers and fries. “The commercials...you know the food is bad for you, but your mouth is just watering. You want it so bad.” Vanessa says she eats fast food about three times a week; that’s a marked improvement since she started the program. “I used to eat McDonalds every day,” she admits.

Terry says he’s not fazed by stories like Vanessa’s. “I like to joke about getting discouraged, but it makes me happy that they can even be critical [about food],” he says. “Even the fact that she’s aware of what she’s eating. She’s reducing risk. She don’t get the gold medal, but she gets the consolation prize because that’s improvement. And this is after being in here for four months, so two years from now, we don’t know where she’ll be at.”

And, notes Terry, young people often don’t take the most direct route to their destinations. “When I was in high school, yeah, I went to Taco Bell and drank Cokes and Sprites and all that stuff,” he says. “It’s like William Blake wrote: ‘The road of excess leads to wisdom,’ and some folks have to go through that. I think the seeds are planted.” ●

A Clean Start

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of community members to advise the health department on AIDS—which he handpicked and which meets behind closed doors. (Clear sits on the panel.)

Frieden apologizes for none of this. Activists may be concerned about the Office of AIDS Policy’s oversight role, but he’s focused on its responsibility for preparing the city’s annual application for federal funding. With that process under the health department’s control, he points out, the city got an \$18 million boost this year. “I kind of wish people would focus on the substance,” he says, “rather than the symbolism.”

Moreover, even Frieden’s critics agree that he has been more visible and accessible than any health commissioner in memory. He’s met with every HIV community planning body in the city—usually nodding respectfully as they light into him. But critics say he’s not much of a listener. “It’s refreshing to have a very smart guy who doesn’t feel like a politician,” says Keller. “But the problem is that the way he comes off is, ‘I know best. I’m the expert. And I don’t care what you think.’”

Frieden sees this all as a diversionary conversation about style rather than what matters: lowering HIV infection. “I’m really blunt about things,” he shrugs, “and you have groups that have created large organizations that are very wedded to one model of doing things.”

The lingering question is whether Frieden’s impatience with the give-and-take of commu-

nity politics is actually preventing him from achieving the bottom-line results he seeks. In the end, can you really take the politics out of public health—and *should* you? Harm-reduction veterans say the final plan for the Long Island City needle exchange is a shadow of what it could have been if the department had started by building support within the community it planned to target. “It’s wonderful to have a commissioner that’s so supportive of syringe exchange and wants to put himself out so far,” says Keller. “But I think what’s missing is, you need bottom-up as much as you need top-down.”

Keller’s speaking from experience. Like Afterhours, her group is one of a few that are mobile. CitiWide works in apartment buildings that contract with the city to house poor people living with HIV. But when buildings leave the program, CitiWide finds itself stuck, because going into a new building means first getting community board approval in that neighborhood. Over the years, the group has lost all four of the buildings it once served in the Bronx, and to make up for that gap it decided to add an exchange at its office near The Hub.

CitiWide began reaching out to the surrounding community in the fall of 2001, and spent the next year and a half locked in a punishing political campaign. They took the fight directly to their most obvious foes, like the police precinct and the parents’ groups—meeting individually with the most hostile board members—and hashed out all the usual ques-

tions. They rounded up local users and had them meet with those in opposition, to explain for themselves why the program was needed. And, in the end, they got one of the city’s most expansive exchange sites. It operates five days a week, 12 hours a day. “We managed to turn it on its head,” Keller brags. “Now we’re like the darling of the community.”

This is the sort of process AIDS activists would like to have seen Frieden and AIDS Center of Queens County engage in Queensbridge and Long Island City. The battle that ensued in those neighborhoods was nothing compared to the controversy needle exchange is likely to stir in Jamaica and Far Rockaway. Marshall has taken on a more prominent role in the community outreach process, and meetings have already begun in Jamaica. But the stakes go up there, too: Jamaica boasts more people diagnosed with AIDS than do 19 states. AIDS activists are waiting on edge to see if Frieden learned something in Queensbridge about how to play the community game.

Gioia just wants the health commissioner to see a broader point about policymaking, and the politics that inevitably accompany it. “I hope the lesson they learned from this is that you can’t take people for granted,” he says. “A flawed process is a flawed result.” ●

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