

COVER STORY

Recipe for Success helps kids make healthy food choices

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Gracie Cavnar admits she's a dyed-in-the-wool foodie. She is friends with many chefs, comes from a community of food people and is an early member of the slow-food movement which counteracts fast food and a fast life and promotes the value of food and where it comes from.

With those assets, she discovered she was in a unique position to bring about effective change in helping combat the epidemic of childhood obesity.

"I first became interested in the fact that there were vending machines in elementary schools. That's something that should not be," Cavnar said. "If a kid has 75 cents in his pocket, he can buy his own soda. Children that young don't have the ability to make a discerning decision, and I felt that was wrong."

So one of the first things she did was work to get vending machines removed from schools.

Out of her passion for educating children about their food choices, the Recipe for Success Foundation was launched in 2005 by Gracie and her husband, Bob Cavnar, to lead the way in hands-on nutrition education aimed at preventing childhood obesity and encouraging long-term health.

The Recipe for Success program, which was introduced in the first Houston elementary school in August 2006 is designed to be a fun, hands-on way for elementary-age kids to learn about food through interaction with local chefs, cooking and gardening.

"You don't have to pound it into them, you lure them to healthy foods by making it fun," Cavnar said. "They also have a high level of ownership to the



Gracie Cavnar, center, works with students through the Recipe for Success program. Children learn to cook, garden and eat healthy foods through the in-school program.

Courtesy photo

Cavnar is excited because now the organization has the resources to say "yes" to those requests.

Also on the horizon, Cavnar is releasing her first children's book in August.

It's called "Eat It! Food Adventures" and is the first in a series that follows a fictional child who travels with Marco Polo as he discovers foods that are at once exotic and familiar.

Cavnar described the book as a combination of an adventure story and a cookbook.

"The book tries to show how alike we all are and how food has always been the language of trade and cultural exchange," she said.

There also are 29 recipes for real food designed for children to cook.

The Recipe for Success program is launching in Missoula, Montana soon, and Cavnar is also working with the mayor of San Antonio, the Dell Center in Austin, groups in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the KIPP Academy in Washington DC to bring the program to those areas.

Locally, Recipe for Success is one of the organizers, along with Urban Harvest and the City of Houston, presenting Food Day Texas on October 24 at the City Hall Farmers Market, which will feature a large outdoor public lunch.

Aside from the in-school programs, the Recipe for Success website, www.recipe4success.org, has a variety of food-related events listed, cooking classes, a corporate wellness program, ask the chef and gardener section and more.

"I'm excited about being able to give as many people as possible the tools that allow them to bring about meaningful change," Cavnar concluded.

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

To learn more about Recipe for Success, visit recipe4success.org.

process when they see it from seed to plate. They develop an awareness and respect for real food."

Cavnar said the classes teach about taste buds, aroma and texture and eye appeal.

At the end of the first year of cooking, school gardens that the children and staff maintain were introduced to the program as well.

"By the end of the school year, the children have a deep understanding of food and are empowered to create their own healthy foods and snacks, and the infor-

mation is delivered in such a way that it's something they'll have for life," she said. "It's not a hand out, or one film, but repetitive hands-on experimental learning that changes lifestyles and life skills."

After measuring the program, studies showed that the average child's consumption of fruits and vegetables increased 30 percent in one year.

The Seed-to-Plate Nutrition Education program has spread to approximately 16 Houston-area schools reaching 4,000 children a year so far, and Recipe for Success organizers are talking to many others about launching the program.

Cavnar is also taking the Seed-to-Plate Nutrition Educa-

tion program nationwide, with the goal of empowering children across the nation to make better choices about their food.

"We've designed a program that has such an impact and lasting effect on children's eating behavior, that we were asked to create a national framework, which we are supporting with a web-based e-learning site for instructors," she said.

Right now the program, which fits in line with First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" initiative, is attracting a lot of attention, having no less than 200 schools nationwide requesting information on Recipe for Success.

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