

Inner city farm stand hopes to change diets

Foodlink selling produce in a 'food desert'

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STAFF WRITER

As he does every Sunday, Mitch Gruber sets up a fresh produce stand at Clifford and Conkey avenues.

About 20 yards away is a group of teens, regular loiterers at this notorious hot spot for drug dealing and occasional violence.

The teens ignore Gruber almost entirely, and don't respond when he calls over to them advertising five-for-a-dollar nectarines or three-for-a-dollar peaches.

But they don't give him a hard time, either, and Gruber takes their silence to mean that this neighborhood, among the city's most troubled, is coming to appreciate his presence.

Gruber, Foodlink's farm market coordinator, has been running a fresh produce stand at Clifford and Conkey every Sunday for the last two months, and each time he's shown up, more neighborhood residents have stopped by to peruse the stand's collard greens, hot peppers and plums.

The stand is a pilot program for the Rochester-based food bank, which targeted the corner early this summer. Recent data

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have shown that people living below the poverty line have far higher rates of obesity than the rest of the population, and researchers have pointed to processed foods and sugary drinks, which are both cheap and high in calories, as the main offenders.



KEVIN M. SMITH graphics editor

So while "food desert" is the long-accepted industry term for areas without access to food, Tom Ferraro, Foodlink's executive director, prefers to describe neighborhoods like this one as "food swamps," because cheap food is available, but it only comes from fast food restaurants and small convenience stores that sell just chips, candy and soda.

For area residents, Foodlink's stand might be their only encounter with fresh produce all week.

"It's close and it's reasonable. You can save a dollar here," said Calvin Moore, 56, a neighborhood resident. "And it's good vegetables and good fruit."

Gruber says that some residents like Moore have been thrilled by his pres-

ence on the corner, and many stop by on their way home from church every week. But others have given him strange looks and some are suspicious of his motives.

"It's funny to call these things a cultural change, but this is a cultural change from what has



been going on for the last 25-some years," said Ferraro. "You've got to get people used to them."

Neighborhood synergy

Recent obesity trends, with poor folks tipping the scales while the upper class remains relatively slim, have turned the rest of human nutritional history on its head.

The statistics are telling, even among children and adolescents. In the Monroe County suburbs, 12 percent of youths between the ages of 2 and 18 are considered obese, but for youths who live in the city, the obesity rate jumps to 22 percent, while an additional 18 percent are considered overweight, according to recent data collected by Golisano Children's Hospital at the University of Rochester.

In Rochester and elsewhere, there are often no large-scale grocery stores in proximity to impoverished neighborhoods, and that leaves convenience stores, which would have to buy produce in small quantities at higher wholesaler prices, to fill a neighborhood's need for fruits and vegetables.

Most of the time, they don't.

The Friendly Mini Mart on Conkey Avenue, situated across the street from Foodlink's stand, stocks some produce for submarine sandwiches, but doesn't sell anything directly to customers.

"We tried it, but we can't sell the type of thing he's selling over there," said Saleh Ali, one of the convenience store's two owners. "We got potatoes, they went bad. We got ba-

nanas, they went bad."

The obesity problem is exacerbated in some city neighborhoods by perceived safety threats, as concerned parents try to keep their children indoors as much as possible, said Bonnie DeVinney, vice president and chief program officer at Greater Rochester Health Foundation, which funded the Golisano Children's Hospital's obesity study.

So when an organization tries to tackle inner-city obesity, they're faced with more than just a nutrition problem, and changing the culture can be a daunting task.

But at Clifford and Conkey, Foodlink has formed partnerships with two area groups who are trying to make the neighborhood a safer place. The Genesee Land Trust, which protects open space for public benefit, owns Conkey Corner Park, where Foodlink sets up its stand, and Project HOPE, a community outreach health program, passed out fliers and promoted the stand throughout the neighborhood and at St. Michael's Church.

"It takes that kind of synergy of organizations and neighborhood to even have a shot of trying to do something like this," said Ferraro.

Clifford and Conkey

In the days leading up to Sunday, Gruber heads to Foodlink's farm in Penfield to stock up on vegetables. Freshwise Farms' hydroponically-grown greens are too pricey for the Clifford and Conkey stand, but the produce grown outdoors can be sold at reasonable prices.

He then picks up unclaimed bags from community-supported agriculture organizers before meeting with some generous farmers, who kick in some of their excess for a fraction of their normal price. He fills in any gaps by buying from a wholesaler and selling the purchases at cost.

The prices at the stand are a pittance compared to suburban farmers markets, but while the food bank could probably afford to give the produce away, a food handout isn't a long-term solution.

The organization is out to prove that the model is sustainable as a for-profit business, and that anyone with an entrepreneurial spirit and a willingness to jockey produce from farms on the outskirts to corners in the inner city can make a living selling fresh fruits and vegetables in Rochester.

"There's no doubt in my mind that these things are viable, as long as farmers understand that they're not always going to get \$4 for a quart of peaches, and as long as people in impoverished neighborhoods understand that they're not going to be getting a quart of peaches for free," said Gruber.

"There's a middle ground somewhere. That's a major reason we charge money for this."

Next summer, Foodlink plans to expand the program to three city corners, and Clifford and Conkey residents agree that there's enough demand to sustain a small farm stand. The key is longevity.

"It's just never been pushed," said Ed Mims, 65,

a neighborhood resident. “Once something takes hold, especially when it

comes to fresh stuff, produce, fruits and vegetables, there’s no way it can

not catch on.” □

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WILL YURMAN staff photographer

Jiasia Taylor, 8, who lives in the neighborhood, helps **Foodlink's** Mitch Gruber set up his produce stand at Clifford and Conkey avenues in Rochester on a recent Sunday.



WILL YURMAN staff photographer

Foodlink's Mitch Gruber and Jiasia Taylor. The food bank plans to have three farm stands in the city.