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Story by Rob Corliss

'School Food' - 2 words which evoke strong emotions. It does not have to be so complicated, food should be fun, kids should feel appreciated, parents should have a voice, and all involved in the execution of the meals should feel inspired as an integral part of the solution – what all this boils down to is... FOOD IS ABOUT CARING!

In my positive thinking brain, school food is NOT about \$\$\$ or bureaucracy, it is about treating our kids the way we would treat our neighbors, friends or family coming into our home for a long awaited visit. It's about teaching the students that food is fun.

My personal goal, simply stated is to inspire & teach people (especially kids) a connection to their food, environment, health and wellness. Hence my, newly created, volunteer position as Executive Chef of Wellness for the Nixa Missouri School District. This new role is an energizing opportunity to make a long-term impact in the community. That kinda sums up my approach to life – leave things better then you found 'em.

I'm not trying to fix a system – I'm trying to simply share my passion. Focusing on the positives of what can be & what should be charts a refreshing path. A path that in its own way will hopefully touch people and be a catalyst for a new perspective and approach to caring. One constant source of inspiration, friendship & leadership is from Dr. Kopp, the director of the Nixa SHAC (School Health Advisory Council) & principal at High Pointe Elementary whom has tremendous passion for the long-term wellness of the students.

The district will take focused, small BIG steps on our journey, engaging the students & parents at every turn via creative programs. The success of these programs will be ascertained through a collaborative effort between the schools & dedicated staff, volunteers, our foodservice provider, the students & parents.

Our initial programs include the Garden Spot, which will begin with 2 pilot schools (K-4, 4-5) and serve a fresh salad, fruits & veggies (as much local as possible) as a side offering in addition to the reimbursable hot meal. A huge part of the programs are the kids get to make their own choices – by giving students a choice, they will have empowered ownership & hopefully buy into what they are eating. Monthly tableside food tastings will be held in the cafeteria where we will introduce students to new fresh fruits/veggies in imaginative ways. Chef Rob's recipe of the month is meant to inspire parents & students to explore the joy of cooking together, we will feature this on the district's social media outlets & web, and Interactive in/out of classroom culinary demos we hope will generate community excitement & hands on learning.

Our biggest challenge will be cultivating & then sustaining actionable awareness. Join Nixa in the celebration of food and show the students in your hometown that FOOD IS ABOUT CARING!

About the author: Chef Rob Corliss is the founder of ATE, All Things Epicurean – a culinary company focused on sustainable innovation for the betterment of our communities. ATE works with leading national brands & restaurants creating their next big strategic culinary ideas. Locally, chef Rob has also helped to create a thriving garden-culinary program at Goddard preschool & at Pleasant View Elementary in Springfield and is lending culinary expertise to the SUAC D.I.R.T school project.

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