



NYSHEPA

New York State Healthy Eating
and Physical Activity Alliance

Advocate's Battle Cry: Improve New Yorkers' Health!

BY MICHAL JEFFERS

It's a lot like the weather; everyone talks a great deal about eating right and working out. Nancy Huehnergarth is actually doing something about it. It all started six years ago with this concerned mom going to her daughter's school and being disappointed by various lunch room fare, essentially the lack of healthy meal choices at the time. This led to Huehnergarth chairing a PTA nutrition committee to promote change. The more she learned, the more involved she became. Her work has progressed to the point where Nancy and NYSHEPA, the state-wide alliance she co-founded, are respected and instrumental in changing the way we eat and live.

New York State Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Alliance, or "NYSHEPA," is a group of concerned advocates and organizations working together to improve the food and fitness environment in New York State. While the organization has set lofty goals, Nancy herself is down-to-earth, realistic, and non-judgmental. "I prefer not to use the term 'obesity' too much, as it turns people off," Huehnergarth points out. "Also, people of normal weight need to improve their nutrition and physical activity environments, too."

Logically, education and awareness must begin early, with children. "Teach the kids while they're still young to choose *real* food: fruit, veggies, whole grains. This isn't radical; it's what Grandma used to do." What about parents with little time and budget restrictions? "There doesn't have to be a huge effort in cost and preparation time. Do what you can. There's room for flexibility."

Huehnergarth knows firsthand the frustration of parents who strive to teach their children good habits at home, only to see them foiled. She is firm in her conviction that no school district should have the right to fill vending machines with junk food and make soft drinks available to students.

A Different Take

For many reasons, not every parent is thrilled when certain foods are pulled from school lunch menus, or when new policies banning non-nutritious snacks are instituted. While the vast majority of parents affirm their commitment to raising healthy, active children, there can be legitimate debate about how this is best achieved. It's also significant that several parents interviewed on this subject chose not to have their names revealed, lest they run the risk of being labeled over-indulgent parents or in favor of unhealthy foods.

Nothing could be further from the truth; there are just other considerations involved. "I am teaching my kids the importance of making good decisions, and I resent the fact that the assumption is being made that it's wise to take away that choice," states one mother. "They have to learn that children can't have everything, that sometimes you say 'no thanks.' School is about learning, and learning to avoid temptation most of the time is key."

Others worry that by pulling certain favorite foods, kids lose out on special treats that help to enhance the school day for some.

Still others are concerned they can no longer send in fun and tasty goodies to their child's school. "My child doesn't have a weight problem, and while I feel sad for kids who do, I also feel he's being punished unfairly. I'm a great baker, and it gave him a real sense of pride when he brought in the cookies or cupcakes I made and shared them with the class."

Huehnergarth has honed ready answers to these concerns. "Kids do have to learn to make good choices, but we don't deliberately tempt them with drugs or alcohol to teach them this skill," she argues. "It makes no sense to undo the good teaching being done in school health classes by keeping junk food in vending machines, and unhealthy fare in the cafeteria. This is not modeling good eating habits."

It should be noted that in this crusade, there are many more radical views than those expressed by Huehnergarth, and that she makes a point of congratulating school district officials when improvements are finally instituted.

She is also quick to acknowledge that she is neither the first nor the only one engaged in the healthy food and fitness movement, and that "some people have been advocating for more than ten years."

Beyond School Lunch Fare

In other areas, NYSHEPA is advocating for a state-wide law that requires calorie labeling for most fast-food restaurants—at least 15 outlets nationwide and five in New York State. This regulation is now only in effect for New York City, and some chains have already complied voluntarily. There are many other wise food choices

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eateries can provide, such as having salad be the default side order rather than potatoes; portion control awareness; and heart-healthy labeling.

"People have a right to know what they're eating," adds Huehnergarth. "They want to make smart choices, and it's not always obvious. A recent NYSHEPA poll showed that many people have no idea how calorie-rich chain restaurant food really is, and which items are carrying a whopping calorie count. "You don't have to give up everything; just be aware," she notes. "I'll eat dessert, but it has to be worth it, and it has to be good."

Of course, eating right is only half the battle, Huehnergarth points out. We've become a nation of watchers rather than doers; for much of our lives, we sit in front of screens. The so-called "Built Environment" must improve. Communities, including New Castle, need to build even more sidewalks and introduce bike lanes to help promote physical activity among its residents. Rather than having elevators right at the front door of an office building, it would promote fitness to have them at the end of the lobby, with well-lit, well-maintained stairs nearer the door.

Aiding Less Affluent Areas

The situation is often far worse in economically disadvantaged communities. One initiative that NYSHEPA is promoting includes better snacks and more physical activity in licensed after-school programs. NYSHEPA has also supported the NYC Green Cart Law which passed this spring. Some 1,000 carts selling fresh produce will be licensed around the five boroughs, targeting neighborhoods where local grocery stores don't carry fruit and vegetables.

While understanding that "not everyone is metabolically gifted," Huehnergarth expresses deep concern for the future of our country and our economy if the obesity epidemic isn't brought under control. Rising absenteeism, insurance costs, and Medicaid expenditures have been linked to the poor physical condition of modern Americans, and we're all paying the price.

Fortunately, she's far from alone. A steering committee composed of 11 major organizations, such as the American Heart Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, guides NYSHEPA's mission. Since a considerable body of research has linked obesity to the development of breast, colon and prostate cancers, the American Cancer Society has also become a NYSHEPA leader, as the fiscal sponsor of the organization. By employing Huehnergarth, they are essentially affirming that the work being done by NYSHEPA is worthy of funding to promote a healthy lifestyle that may ultimately help reduce incidences of cancer.

But change comes with cost, and plenty of opposition. Many businesses have contractual deals with soda companies. The organization that represents school lunch workers has raised objections, as has the NYS Restaurant Association. The cry of "they're not going to take away my Twinkies, are they?" as lamented by one school official, was passed on to Huehnergarth as an illustration of how resistant many people are to new and different ways of doing things.

Swimming Against the Tide: A Sense of Humor Helps

No one knows Huehnergarth's determination and commitment better than Michael Seserman, chair of NYSHEPA and co-founder, along with being the director of cancer prevention services for the American Cancer Society, Eastern division. "Nancy is assertive and adept at bringing people together, reaching agreement, and mobilizing for change. She also has the unique ability to laugh at herself; this is an important trait to have when swimming against the tide of society. We can always count on her to lighten up the situation, and to keep us on the right track."

There's no doubt that being a crusader can take a physical and emotional toll. As a lobbyist, Huehnergarth must do a great deal of sometimes exhausting traveling, especially to Albany to plead her case. She always tries to make it a day trip, taking the train up in the morning and back in the late afternoon, to be home at night with her family. After all, concern for her kids is where all this began.

When we feel frustrated by the roadblocks in our path, it's good to remember the words of Nancy Huehnergarth: "I've learned so much; how hard it is to stay healthy, and how tough it is to effect a change. It's all about leaving this planet a better place. Stick with it, make an impact, change the world." For information, and to learn how you can join NYSHEPA, go to www.nyshepa.org.