

⇨ SERVING UP A ⇩ SOLUTION

Hoping to prevent childhood obesity, Gracie Cavnar's Recipe for Success Foundation is teaching school kids to say no to fast food and yes—please!—to healthy, home-cooked meals. **By Sondra Forsyth** Photography by Jack Thompson



EVEN IN WINTER, THE RECIPE GARDEN AT MACGREGOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL in Houston is thriving, with butterflies darting among herbs, carrots, tomatoes and spinach. Inside, the fourth-graders in a cooking class are eager to start their assignment for the day—making whole-wheat gingerbread applesauce mini muffins. Gracie Cavnar, 58, asks who wants to measure the flour and crack the eggs, and a sea of hands shoots up in the air. Sporting white aprons and big smiles, the students scoop, stir, pour and pop the batter into the convection oven. As a sweet and spicy aroma fills the room, they can barely wait for the timer to ring.



Gracie, who studied at the Cordon Bleu in Paris, has always had a passion for eating well.

Finally, they all gather at a big table, wish each other bon appétit and dig in.

“Do the muffins taste good?” Gracie asks, and heads nod in approval. “Would anyone like to add or say something?” Trevoyie, one of the more eloquent kids in the group, happily volunteers. “I like cooking because I can express myself through the flavors,” he says. “And I like gardening because it teaches me that even though plants can’t see or hear, I should treat them the way I’d like to be treated, because they provide food and help clean the air.”

Gracie beams. Offering a fun, hands-on education about healthy eating is what her Recipe for Success Foundation (RfS) is all about. Launched in 2006, the group’s goal is to prevent childhood obesity by changing the way kids eat. RfS now serves 3,500 Houston-area students, who grow, harvest and prepare their own dishes. It also offers after-school sessions, summer camps and nutrition education classes for parents. “We want kids to know that real food doesn’t originate from a drive-thru window or vending machine,” says Gracie. “And we want them to



Students grow, harvest and cook dishes so they’ll know that real food doesn’t originate from a drive-thru window or vending machine, says Gracie.



understand that families who grab meals on the run instead of sitting down together are missing an important chance to connect.” The message seems to be getting across. Says one woman whose grandson is an RfS kid: “He’s trying—and loving—vegetables and other things I never thought he would. He’s even picking out recipes so we can cook and spend more time together. Recipe for Success has changed our lives.”

Gracie has always had a passion for eating well. “I grew up cooking and gardening, and learned early on the extraordinary difference in flavor between processed food and fresh seasonal produce,” she says. After earning a degree in architecture at the University of Texas, she took a brief detour to study at the famed Cordon Bleu in Paris before becoming a public relations executive. In the 1990s, after learning that nearly 50% of fourth-graders in the Houston area were overweight, Gracie waged a successful campaign to banish vending machines from Texas elementary schools. Then she came up with the idea of starting healthy cooking classes that would also teach kids English, math and a little science. “I envisioned a program where students would write essays on their favorite foods, and where they’d learn everything from measurements and fractions to the definition of emulsion,” she says.

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30%
 OF KIDS
 EAT FAST FOOD
 EVERY DAY
 —❦—❦—

↔—↔

20%
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↔—↔

After setting up her nonprofit in 2005, Gracie spent the next year researching school nutrition programs across the country, as well as meeting with city and county commissioners. She also devoted herself to fundraising. “I contacted everyone I knew who might be able to help, including Bill White, who was then mayor of Houston,” she says. “His wife held a kickoff gala for us, which meant I had to do what I said I was going to do!” In short order, Gracie organized dinners that helped bring in private donations and corporate sponsors. On top of that, she convinced 47 of the city’s best chefs to help her teach in the classroom.

The following year Gracie and a small group of friends spent the summer assembling portable cooking stations in her living room. “I ordered prefabricated cooking carts with stainless steel tops, and we added casters on the bottom, power strips and shelves to hold convection ovens and electric burners,” she says. “Then we outfitted each one with pots, pans, measuring spoons, bowls and cutting mats.” Recipe for Success made its debut that September, literally rolling into five local

schools for a monthly cooking session with fourth-graders. “Back then we’d set up the carts in the hallway, then go into the classrooms and cover the desks with oilcloth,” Gracie recalls. “For cleaning up, we boiled water in electric kettles and poured it into big plastic tubs.”

RfS has come a long way from those humble beginnings. It now has 19 full- and part-time employees. The program has helped schools install permanent kitchens, and Gracie has trained teachers to conduct the classes so she doesn’t have to lead them all herself. In 2008 she won a President’s Volunteer Service Award from George W. Bush, and last year met with White House chef Sam Cass to help spearhead Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign. “You’ll still find me in a school at least once a week,” she says, “but this way I have time to raise funds and keep the program growing.”

Gracie is quick to point out that Recipe for Success wouldn’t have been possible without her family’s support. Her husband, Bob, 57, president and CEO of the oil and gas company Milagro Exploration, serves on the charity’s board of directors. Gracie’s 36-year-old son,

Justin, who works with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in Washington, D.C., designed the group's website; and Bobby, 31, an investment banker in Houston, helps with fundraising. Daughter Gina, 26, has been a tireless RfS volunteer in the classroom. She's also the mother of Gracie's first grandchild, 2-year-old Joseph, and she's gotten him off to a healthy start nutrition-wise. "She makes baby food herself, just like I did," Gracie says. "And his first solid food was whatever the family was having for dinner—only thrown into the blender. Now he loves hummus, broccoli, green beans, carrots, even jambalaya, not to mention every kind of fruit. He gobbles blueberries and strawberries like candy! He's eating right at an early age, which is what I want for all children."

She's already making measurable headway on that front. Researchers at the University of Texas School of Public Health, who assessed students in the RfS program, found that they have significantly increased the number of servings of fruits and vegetables they consume each day. In the meantime, Gracie has ambitious plans to expand the group's reach.

Seventy-five local schools are now on the waiting list to join RfS, and a project is under way to duplicate the program in Alaska, Colorado, Maryland and New York. She's also developing Newtrition, a healthy vending machine company whose proceeds would be used to support RfS. "But my biggest dream for the future is New Hope Farms," she says. "We're working with the mayor's office to turn abandoned property into organic plots. I also want to encourage area farmers to donate fresh food to schools—especially those with youngsters who qualify for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch."

As rewarding as her accomplishments are, nothing gives Gracie more joy than her one-on-one contact with the kids. "They hug me when I arrive," she says. "I look at them as my surrogate children, and it's wonderful to see them learning cooking skills and healthy eating habits. They're also gaining self-confidence and an appreciation of the value of teamwork—lessons that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. For me, that's what puts the 'success' in Recipe for Success." ●

To learn more, go to Recipe4Success.org.



18%

OF ADOLESCENTS
BETWEEN 12
AND 19 YEARS OLD
ARE OBESE, UP
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