

Dynamic Duos

Bill Telepan and Nancy Easton

When Bill Telepan walked into his daughter's school four years ago, the last thing he expected to find was a new calling. Telepan, chef at the noted Manhattan farm-to-table restaurant that bears his name, paused to learn more about an organization called Wellness in the Schools (WITS), whose mission is to combat childhood obesity by promoting healthy eating at public school cafeterias. "How can I help?" he asked Nancy Easton, who founded WITS in 2005 with two other PS 87 parents, Rachel Tore and Kirsten Brashares.

At the time, WITS volunteers were in just three schools. Today, this unique partnership between a nonprofit and the school food provider for New York City's Department of Education, SchoolFood, has expanded to 35 schools in three boroughs. Thanks in part to Telepan's stature in the food world, WITS has raised enough money to hire 16 professional chefs.

"Children rely on adults to help take care of them. Why should we give them food that is processed and bad?" says Telepan. "We have to feed them well for them to get a good start in life."

Nationally recognized nutrition expert Keri Glassman agrees, adding, "By incorporating healthy eating habits and choices into their lives at school, a program such as WITS helps to instill the importance of total health and nutrition as part of a kid's culture. This should be on par with learning about history, math or literature. Changing food culture begins with simple lessons that children will take away and incorporate into their lives."

Telepan started his work with WITS by preparing healthy items on the lunch line at his daughter's cafeteria. Sure, the staff still served feedlot burgers (precooked and then frozen and reheated), but at least kids had options. Infrastructural issues soon revealed themselves, however,

School kitchens, for example, often lacked basic tools like sharp knives and large pots. Telepan's involvement grew as he focused on helping Easton increase the organization's impact.

Since then, the team has refined their partnership: Telepan develops recipes and trains the WITS chefs. Easton writes the curricula for cooking and nutrition classes that some WITS schools offer students and parents. They raise funds together.

WITS has always been creative with its resources, encouraging volunteers to bring their own knives and working

with SchoolFood to source better ingredients, such as local produce and grass-fed beef. Last year, after receiving a \$10,000 grant, WITS served local grass-fed burgers—from Slope Farms in the Catskills—at 18 WITS schools. The Department of Education was impressed and plans to serve these burgers city-wide.

And Easton and Telepan, who were just named "Food Revolution Heroes" by the crusading school lunch reformer Jamie Oliver, will not give up until the organization they are so committed to becomes obsolete. — HANNAH WALLACE



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