



Opinion / Perspective

Hot Cheetos & Warm Memories: Reflections on Ten Years in Community Nutrition Education

By Bryan Johnston, MD

“Go To the Community Without an Ask”

Oh, to be a first-year student at MCW again! That sense of unlimited possibility, the doors opening all around you and the possibility of your entire life-changing in the space of a conversation, a shadowing session, or a community site visit. I remember wanting, within it all, to make a mark.

I joined the Urban & Community Health Pathway and began to learn about Milwaukee, my new home. I learned about the “What, Why, and How” of health disparities, models and innovations, resources, and strengths: what has worked, what has not, what might be possible. Used to identifying and rapidly attempting to solve problems, I began to absorb from mentors like [Dr. David Nelson](#) and [Dr. Linda Meurer](#) the slower and richer approach of Community Engagement. “Go to the community without an ask,” I was told.

The Food Doctors

It was in one of these settings, the [Milwaukee Academy of Science](#), that I learned of concerns about student nutrition knowledge and a lack of nutrition education resources. My friend and classmate, Ahmad El-Arabi, had been involved in a mentoring program there. Ahmad, a master chef, arranged a meeting, and we learned about the school’s history, challenges, resources, constraints, goals, and what their students were struggling with when it came to food.

At the time, school leaders were concerned about the growing practice within the student body of substituting Flamin’ Hot Cheetos for meals, often on a daily basis. The students seemed at best unmotivated to make changes, and more often unaware that a change was recommended.

School leaders felt powerless. We identified nutrition education as an opportunity, but also realized that there was a lack of suitable resources. We worked with the school to develop a

curriculum accessible and engaging for their student population that was nearly entirely Black and eligible for free or reduced lunch prices. We didn't want to just do nutrition education, we wanted to do it well, to innovate, to understand what food meant to the students and their families, and to make it sustainable. We would call it The Food Doctors.

So, Are Flamin' Hot Cheetos Healthy?

I remember walking into the classroom, thirty third graders going wild on their break and., with a jolt of terror, thought, "How are we going to get their attention?" I had planned carefully for how to keep their attention but not how to pull it from these thirty different places. We stood up there, looking helpless. The teacher stepped in, called "1!2!3!" The class immediately replied, "Look at me!" and then silently gazed at us.

Ahmad and I looked at each other and began. We introduced ourselves, in our short white coats, explaining that we were students just like them and had noticed a [video on the internet](#) where elementary school kids were rapping about Flamin' Hot Cheetos. We played a clip and danced along with them. "We really like Flamin' Hot Cheetos," we said, "And we were wondering, have any of you tried them?" Every hand shot up. "How many have had them in the last month?" Nearly every hand rose. "The last week?" The hands stayed up. "Yesterday?" A strong majority remained up. "Well, since we're eating so many of them, we were wondering how healthy they were for us. How many think they're really health? Kind of healthy? Not as healthy? Well, let's take a look..."

Building Something to Last

The trust-building—which started with relatability and cultural relevance, and continued with interaction and engagement—made success possible. Each lesson involved students creating a healthier version of the popular snack, having the chance to apply nutrition lessons in real time—i.e., deciding how much oil and salt to add to their whole-grain Flamin' Hot Popcorn. Graphic descriptions, relying on the [MyPlate nutrition curriculum](#), built the theoretical foundation. Impact was demonstrated in short term knowledge and attitude impact and longer-term knowledge retention. Funding was achieved, more medical students recruited, new areas of innovation and inquiry pursued. A sustainability mechanism was developed, relying on the pathway structure to allow for longitudinal involvement and student leadership development.

Generations

When founding faculty director Dr. David Nelson handed off the program to me, I didn't know what to say. It felt like a small delicate animal in my hands, which he had incubated when I was a student and shepherded while I had receded into the clinical years of medical school and then residency. I didn't want to hurt it. But as he introduced me to the student leaders and filled me

in on what I had missed, I quickly found my footing, inspired by the work that had been accomplished, the medical students who had contributed to and grown through the program into community-engaged physicians, the elementary students engaged, the new partnerships developed—and, probably more impressively, the original ones, like Milwaukee Academy of Science, which had persisted.

I felt connected to the great circle of medical education—to the past and future, to impacts I could readily describe and those I would never know about. I began meeting with eager first year students, watching them engage with the community in the same rich and dynamic ways I remembered. I felt a kinship to them, felt the same unlimited hope for what they would become, perhaps with The Food Doctors playing a part.

For further reading:

Johnston, B., El-Arabi, A., Tuomela, K., & Nelson, D. (2019). The Food Doctors: A pilot study to connect urban children and medical students using nutrition education. *Health Education Journal*, 78(4), 441–450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0017896918816735>

Cory M, Johnston B, Nelson D. A Student-Driven Community Engagement Model for School Nutrition Education Programs. *J Sch Health*. 2021 12;91(12):1024-1029.

Y.N.RichKids. *Hot Cheetos & Takis*. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YLy4j8EZIk> Aug 08 2012. Accessed Jan 13 2022.

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