

## Drive-Thru

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### Common Threads Foster Common Bonds



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Cooking is making a comeback. Of course, to a degree, it never left--people will always apply to heat to their food so, at the very least, it isn't toxic. But the culinary renaissance we're experiencing is less about the simple necessity of sating hunger and more about galvanizing culture, promoting good health, and reintroducing the communal bonds food can enable. First Lady Michelle Obama's **Let's Move** initiative is educating children and families on the benefits of healthy eating habits; and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's **Food Revolution** has campaigned to get more nutritious menus in schools.

In Chicago, the non-profit organization **Common Threads** is front and center in the movement. Co-founded by chef Art Smith in 2003, the organization has a simple goal: to use food as a tool to build cultural awareness and strengthen family bonds. What started as a small initiative at Shoemith Elementary in Hyde Park has ballooned into a national organization buttressed by a lineup of all-star chefs, including Paul Kahan of Blackbird and Chris Nugent of Les Nomades.

In that initial start-up period, the focus was on breaking down cultural barriers; Smith hatched the idea for Common Threads after cooking for 9/11 volunteers. His thinking was that by teaching kids about other cultures through food, he could help create a more tolerant and open-minded world.

But Smith and Executive Director Linda Novic O'Keefe noticed something startling in their early efforts--namely the poor eating habits of the children they taught.

"The kids were eating so much vending machine loot," O'Keefe said. "We started talking to them about what they were eating for lunch, and it became very apparent that we needed to morph the curriculum to better suit their needs. We didn't want to depart from the original mission of the organization, but we felt it was prudent to teach the kids how to make healthy, affordable, nutrient-rich recipes."

The goal became one of food empowerment. Common Threads now offers 10-week programs for children in 20 schools across the city. Students learn how to build a balanced meal and are given the knowledge needed to make healthy choices (every lesson is in line with state nutritional standards). Their culinary education also takes them on journeys across the globe--though without leaving the classroom, of course. While promoting good eating, Common Threads also works to integrate cultural studies into their lessons. One week kids are learning the proper way to wear a sari as they experiment with Indian fare; the next they are sampling breads and understanding their place in French culture.

The organization stretches beyond the classroom as well, reaching out to parents with nutritional guides, lessons on how to build a pantry, and recipes to feed a family of four for under \$15. Establishing a routine of cooking and eating at home has effects beyond abating childhood obesity; studies show that in families that eat together three to four meals a week, children are less likely to experiment with smoking and drugs.

"We're on the second generation of non-cookers, and we have to break the cycle. We have to make sure that what we're eating really counts," O'Keefe said.

Still, knowledge can only go so far. There are still many hurdles to overcome when getting children to eat better. Vending machines are an ever-present fixture in many schools, and state nutritional standards for cafeterias are not always what they should be. And perhaps most difficult is simple accessibility to fresh, healthy food.

"Most of our families live in food deserts," O'Keefe said. "They're four to six miles away from grocery stores that carry fresh food. It's hard to get to the store when you're juggling multiple jobs and don't have a car."

Since its inception, Common Threads has continually grown and expanded its reach. The organization currently serves four schools in D.C., four in Miami, two community centers in L.A., and is hoping to partner with a school in New York in the fall. Like any non-profit, funding is always a challenge, but that hasn't deterred Common Threads from taking risks and being bold in their expansion.

"We have a waiting list in all our cities and more schools continue to ask for our program," O'Keefe said. "We want to sustain the program we have and give it to everybody."

Like Food Revolution and Let's Move, Common Threads understands that the success and failure of their organization ultimately comes down to the people in the communities they serve. That's why the organization prides itself on being hands-on; they show people how to make recipes and take families to grocery stores in an effort to teach them how to shop.

"We help empower families, schools, and communities to come together and demand more for their neighborhoods, for grocery stores and food access," O'Keefe said.

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