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Kids get 'Veggiecation' at Whole Foods

by Maggie Giuffrida | January 21, 2013

RIDGEWOOD, NJ — "How are you guys doing today?" Lisa Suriano, program creator of Veggiecation — a nutrition and culinary education program that introduces young children between kindergarten and sixth grade to the world of vegetables — asked her class of 15 students on Thursday, Jan. 10, at Whole Foods, here.

"Good!" responded the energetic youngsters.



Lisa Suriano

"So tell me," she said. "Do you guys like vegetables?"

A brief silence struck the audience before a few brave souls answered with a little less-than-enthusiastic, "Yeah..."

Never one to let a tough crowd faze her, Ms. Suriano continued her lesson plan by asking the children if they would like to help her cook, which seemed to reignite their interest as slowly but surely each student put down their crayons and shifted their attention to the colorful assortment of vegetables and cooking utensils she placed in front of them.

As the daughter of a classically trained chef who owned a food consulting company, Ms. Suriano's passion for produce can certainly be attributed to her upbringing.

After receiving her bachelor of science degree in business administration in 2005 from the College of New Jersey and her masters degree in nutrition and food science in 2010 from Montclair State University, Ms. Suriano realized that there was a need to bring proper nutrition education to today's youth, hence the creation of The Veggiecation Program.

"Our mission is to educate and promote vegetables and their health benefits to children," she told *The Produce News*.

Since The Veggiecation Program's start up in the fall of 2009, Ms. Suriano has partnered with Whole Foods' Northeast region to bring monthly Veggiecation classes to 23 markets in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Her goal, she said, is to teach children and their parents how to create healthy, affordable, delicious and easy dishes.

"We need fruits and vegetables to make us healthy," one eager student proclaimed when Ms. Suriano asked why eating produce is important, to which she replied, "Very good!"

As the students helped her whip up a celery and pear salad with homemade dressing, and a "minty peasto" (mint pesto) dish, which utilizes peas as a main ingredient, Ms. Suriano taught them about the health benefits of each vegetable they were using.

For example, "celery fights colds, gives you brain power and helps make you a better athlete," she said.

She also shared with the students a story about her childhood and how her father used to let her taste-test all his recipes, but there was one stipulation: each new dish required at least two tastes. The reason for this, she explained, was because the first time you try something new, you're nervous and think you won't like it, but the second time you get over the fear and stand a better chance at enjoying it.

Sticking to her father's rule, each student was encouraged to give the celery and pear salad and mint pesto two tries, which was then followed by an official "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" vote.

Results came in for the celery and pear salad, and the votes were split. Some kids loved the creation, even going as far as giving two thumbs way up, while others let their facial expressions do most of the talking, as only children can truly do.

The mint pesto, on the other hand, was a clear winner, receiving a unanimous two thumbs up from all participating parties.

In the end, regardless of their vote, each child learned and tried something new, which is the main objective of the program, Ms. Suriano said.

For more information on The Veggiecation Program, or to find a class near you, visit www.veggiecation.com.