But I Don’t Like Veggies

By Didi Emmons

This article is an excerpt from Didi’s cover article printed in Edible Boston (and featured on the Edible Nation blog) this fall. Just wanted to draw your attention to a nice feature about the Haley House. We have print copies available in the café and corner shop (the photos are great!), but you can also download the full text:
http://www.edibleboston.net/content/index.php/articles/fall-2008.htm

The teenagers in my class are laughing and bouncing off the kitchen walls, and one of them, Gina, is singing full throttle into a rubber spatula “Should Have Let You Go” from Keisha Cole a la MTV, thrusting herself onto her buddy Giselle. I’m thinking she really could pursue a future as the next MTV star, but I force myself to move on as we have a lot of ground to cover. “Hello everyone. Today we are making a pizza with our own organic dough, tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella, red peppers, sweet potatoes, and caramelized onions.” I get no reaction.

“Okay, from 1 to 10, how psyched are you about today’s recipe?” Two give me a 10 and then four teens in a row give me a one. Then it’s Giselle’s turn. Looking as if I’ve just punished her, she grumbles “Zero. That pizza is nasty,” I interject, “Giselle, do you remember what we say instead of nasty? She says carefully, “I don’t care for vegetables, thank you,” then follows with “they make me throw up every time”.

I often feel like a killjoy populating their beloved foods with vegetables, but there is a reason for my antics. Although the classes may illicit fear and loathing, there is a lot to learn. Our mission: To learn the difference between good food and junk food, the impact junk food has on our body, and most importantly, how to cook.

Soon, knives flail, the onions are sliced, sweet potatoes cubed, peppers cut. The students are bright, inquisitive, engaged, and intent on getting the job done right.

Boston Police officer Bill Baxter (a.k.a. Donut) teaches gang resistance in the public schools and came up with the idea to bring his students to the café for cooking classes. As a child, he had taken cooking classes. As an adult, he became conscious that the way we pre-judge foods (such as “I plain hate onions”) is the same mental mechanism that we use to pre-judge people and

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Didi Emmons
photo by Michael Piazza
Volunteering

As we approach the holidays the weather worsens and out of doors becomes impossible. While we have a lot of volunteer inquiries, everyone seems to be busy in the days that surround them. We would love to see you volunteer early in the Christmas season. Please be in touch if you are interested.

Today, the office is quiet. Kathie has spent all day in meetings at the cafe, her "second office," Noreen, still managing all of our housing 15 years later, is off meeting a contractor, and Kathleen O'Connor, our CFO, is at the bank. The live-in community is about to welcome its second child into its midst, and the corner shop is having a special "Baked Goods for a Dollar" day. Sitting at the development desk, I've received calls from folks looking for directions to the café, and calls from folks looking for volunteer opportunities. In the quiet of the day, I am crafting this letter to ask for your contributions to help sustain our programming. The underpinning of Haley House has always been people supporting our efforts in whatever way they could.

In August we offered our first outdoor dinner and a movie at the café. After a sunset Jellysmoke was projected on a giant inflatable screen. Despite some technical difficulties the evening was a great success.

Horace had been a truck driver, making enough money that at first he didn't qualify for a subsidy. He wasn't poor enough and therefore without a subsidy his rent was $568 a month. But one day he asked me in the hallway, "Lady, I can't pay this rent no more. They retired me. Can you do anything about that?" And we were able to obtain a subsidy for him and give him a degree of economic stability. Another time he met me outside the building. "I can't do those steps no more," referring to the four flights of stairs he climbed to reach his fourth floor unit. "Can you fix that?" And we were able to move him into a ground floor unit where stairs weren't an issue.

"Horace, you're not looking so good. Where were you? We missed you." "I just got back from the hospital. Kidney transplant." "Can I do anything?" "I'll let you know." But it was clear to both of us - and left unsaid - that his health was rapidly deteriorating, and he was suffering.

As the most recent inspection approached in early July, I approached Horace in his unit one more time. His back was to me as he worked carefully at a painting on an eave.

"Mike, I've been thinking about the painting on the eave in the living room, could I have that for my birthday?" I was about to say no, but then I realized that he was talking about the painting on the eave of the house, not the painting in the living room. I said yes, and we talked about the weather. It was a perfect day - a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. The grass was green and the flowers were blooming. The whole world looked alive and beautiful. I thought about how lucky I was to be here, and how lucky Horace was to have me.

I asked him if there was anything else he needed. He shook his head and said no. Then he turned and walked out of the door. I stood there for a moment, watching him go. Then I turned around and started to pack up my things.

I knew it was time to go. I had things to do. But as I walked out of the door, I couldn't help but think about Horace. His kind face and gentle spirit. His love for life. I hoped that someday I would see him again. But for now, I offered to clean that place up. And then I would hold my breath on inspection day, hoping his room would pass muster - which it usually did miraculously. "Thanks, Horace," I quietly offer as we moved on to the next unit.

Over the years, we've met outside on the steps as he waited for a cab to take him for a check-up. "How's it going, Horace?" "I'm aching bad, Noreen." "Can I do anything? Do you need a ride?" "I'll let you know." But it was clear to both of us - and left unsaid - that his health was rapidly deteriorating, and he was suffering.

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Today we have more circles of activity dancing across the page. Our staffing has increased, ready to hire people in the Dudley Square community to learn valuable skills and give back through fresh produce and healthy, tasty creations at the cafe. The farm is also going strong. Beth and Bob receive weekly volunteers and donate thousands of pounds of produce to the cafe and food pantries. Our cooking classes are thriving and receiving more requests than ever before.

In closing, I ask you to think about what Haley House has given to you, to those you know, and to our community. We work so hard to abide in our mission, focused on the root causes of suffering, while being mindful of ethics, justice, and love. We try not to take offense, so please consider opening your hearts.

Thank you for your support, thank you for your participation, and thank you for your care of Haley House through our entire 43 years.

Sincerely,
Christine Evans
Director of Development

If you would like to donate to Haley House please use the enclosed envelope or go to www.haleyhouse.org/contribute.htm.
groups. Such prejudice is based on fear and is often mistaken while cutting us off from enjoyment, growth, and connection. Officer Baxter sees the kitchen as a laboratory. He constantly informs the youth during class “always be willing to take in new information.” “If you hate onions on burgers, you might actually like them in soup, so check it out.”

The whole-wheat pizza dough is ready and laid out on a big sheet pan. It was made earlier by the Haley House Café training program. I invite the students to touch and get familiar with the way fresh dough feels. Darren, 14, squeezes the edge of the dough and asks with excitement, “can you chew this like gum?”

A half hour later, while the rest of the girls are setting the table, Giselle, who was lamenting about the vegetable pizza an hour ago, watches me like a hawk as I pull the pizza from the oven. I’m guessing she’s watching so she can choose the slice of pizza with the fewest vegetables. But she asks me how to know when a pizza is done (the underside of dough becomes golden) and I let her cut the pizza into squares, a job that takes considerable strength, but she handles it with confidence.

At the next class she is impatient to start chopping and raises her hand first for every task. By the sixth class, I overhear Giselle boast to Gina that she plans to go to culinary school. Best of all, she has been eating (and keeping down) a portion of vegetables in each class.

Danielle and Caliph’s son, and the younger brother of Axié, the newest member of the Haley House community who was born on the second floor of 23 Dartmouth Street on October 30th, 2008.

Photo by Savannah Jacobson