

Community and Lifestyles

Workshops teach skills for sustainable living

by Bethany Spicher Schonberg

Green chilis and cumin seeds are flying, pots are bubbling and spicy smells are multiplying as fast as dirty dishes. A dozen eager cooks cluster around instructor Sunil Patel as he demonstrates the Gujarati recipes he learned from his mother—with a Central Pennsylvania twist.

Cucumbers aren't in season, so shredded kohlrabi goes into the raita. Mashed winter squash thickens the dal and beets substitute for the kuchumbar's traditional tomatoes. Cumin, coriander and fenugreek, Patel assures us, can be grown here.

Katherine Watt work behind the scenes, washing dishes, chopping potatoes and snapping pictures. This cooking class was her brainchild, along with a recent series of community workshops that aim to facilitate the region's transition from reliance on fossil fuels toward a more local economy.

"As it becomes harder to transport things from China, we'll need to know how to make our own," Watt explained.

Participants in November's workshop series learned to make Indian food with

local ingredients, as well as scarves, honey, pillowcases, bread, applesauce and compost piles.

Watt, a State College writer and community organizer, said she thinks about the end of cheap oil "almost constantly."

Last September, Watt launched the Spring Creek Homesteading Fund blog, a virtual gathering place for creating a sustainable food system in the Spring Creek watershed. The newly-incorporated non-profit offers grants for community gardens and kitchens and coordinates community potlucks in addition to overseeing the workshop series.

Watt's goal is to offer workshops quarterly in 2012. Potential topics for February's series include sauerkraut-making, hoop house construction and home beer-brewing, among others. Watt's vision for future workshops includes blacksmithing, candle-making and, possibly, changes to local regulations. She is seeking instructors for urban goat-keeping with the proviso "probably not legal under current zoning laws."

Watt borrowed the term "reskilling workshops" from the Transition Towns network. Last year, State College signed on as an offi-



Sylvia Feldman educates participants Thursday, Nov. 10, during the first session of the organic beekeeping workshop. Photo by Jessica Paholsky

cial Transition Town, community number 294, in a movement that started in Totnes, Ireland in 2006 and now spans the globe.

From Brazil to Japan, cities are preparing for energy crises by teaching survival skills that were once common knowledge: how to grow food, build houses, repair machines

and, most importantly for Watt, how to spend time together.

"A big part of transitioning to more connected, mutually supporting neighborhoods

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Eating disorder support group helps parents

by Andrea Rochat

A local group for parents of children with eating disorders provides a space to discuss the difficulties they face, to ask questions of providers and to receive emotional support from one another.

The group, which meets at 7 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month in the Mount Nittany Medical Center, is facilitated by pediatrician Kristie Kaufman and nutritionists Jody Whipple and Joeleen Stocker.

The group began in September 2010 at the prompting of patients' parents, who approached doctors in search of a new element in the traditional system of treatment and therapy. Although it incorporated peer-counseling, it often excluded parents whose children were not ready for—or did not want—family counseling.

Kaufman remarked that, other than paying for their own counselors, parents had no other

venue in which to ask questions and share their struggles. She added that the privacy of the group helps its members speak freely.

"We ask that the patients not come because it's not the intention of the support group," Kaufman said. "It's for parents to discuss, within themselves, their experiences. A lot of parents feel very guilty when this happens—and confused, obviously—so it's a good chance for them to talk about their daughters' or sons' experiences and how it started and...dig down to the whys."

While the support group focuses on illnesses like bulimia, which is typified by regular bingeing and purging of food, and anorexia nervosa, characterized by severe restriction of calories, Kaufman said that, often, eating disorders can be some combination of the two. She added that disorders can be the result of multiple factors in a child's life and do not necessarily begin with body image issues.

Contributing factors to eating disorders range from personality traits to genetic predisposition to environmental factors. A few markers include: Type A personalities, tendencies toward perfectionism, low self-confidence, an inclination to view complex issues in polar terms, family history, dysfunction within the home, pressure at school and strained relationships with peers.

"A lot of times, it's a combination of everything," Kaufman said. "It's nobody's fault, but there are definitely areas of improvement and areas that we can help the child deal with their stress in a better way than through their eating disorder."

Beyond that, she explained, eating disorders are often tied to issues with stress, anxiety and depression. These many factors, she added, can lead to a person's need for control, which can lead to a need to control his or her diet and, finally, body.

Although eating disorders are considered

a mental illness, Kaufman points out that they are not confined to the brain.

"Illnesses become physical," she said. "Once [people] have the eating disorder and become somewhat malnourished, that in itself can make those symptoms worse, as far as obsessive-compulsive symptoms, anxiety and depressive symptoms...Their body is not being fed so, mentally, it can make everything so much worse, which in turn can make the eating disorder worse...It kind of just rolls upon itself and cycles."

Kaufman said she takes issue with the term, "mental illness," not only because it promotes a misunderstanding of eating disorders but also because it encourages what she sees as a very present stigma that keeps people from recognizing and talking about the problem.

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Exploring aspects of our physical health

by Matthew Hertert

Last month we began an investigation of health. We discussed the importance of inventorying our personal definitions of health and also acknowledged that most of us have “stuff,” patterns we engage in that sometimes sabotage our best intentions to improve our health.

The next step is to look at different aspects of our Beings—physical, mental, emotional, unconscious and spiritual—and look at simple, effective ways in each category to deepen our well-being. The aspect most of us are familiar with struggling in is the physical, so we’ll start there.

The broad realm of physical health falls into several sub-categories: diet, elimination, exercise, use and environment. We can then identify certain realities and make choices that are less convenience-driven and more wellness-oriented.

Diet is one of the most important, most complex and most impactful for all us. The saying “You are what you eat” is absolutely true, and while diet should be a simple thing, commerce has made it painfully complex.

Most of us know there are legitimate questions about the effects of genetic modification of crops, factory farming and ubiquitous processing of food. Many people also wonder when to buy organic (even with the experience and understanding of nutrition that 37 years of diabetes has allowed me, I still find myself questioning this one).

There are also serious issues related to the acid-base character of foods, as increased acidity of your system can cause or advance disease. One example of this is the fact that soda is so acidic, your body needs to leech calcium from your bones just to neutralize it so it doesn’t fry your digestive tract.

Just knowing these questions exist empowers your decision-making, but one of the biggest challenges in seeking answers to them is the abundance of seemingly contradictory research. Simply comparing the messages in “Forks over Knives” to “The Oiling of America,” both well-researched and compelling films, can be maddening.

This is one area where being willing to ask for support is probably smart. Luckily

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we have great holistic nutritionists in Happy Valley. In addition to offering tests to identify where you’re off balance, they can guide you to balanced answers to these questions.

A simple, pragmatic place to start is making your diet as unprocessed and organic as possible.

Elimination is rarely discussed but is also really important. I’m not just referring to regular bladder and bowel function, necessary to get toxins and waste products out of your body, but also to what you put on your skin. Again, there are legitimate questions about deodorant, make-up and sunscreen. James Bond fans remember how Goldfinger killed Jill Masterson.

Skin is your biggest organ, and it not only breathes, it excretes junk. There are legitimate concerns about connections between antiperspirant ingredients (because it forces toxins to stay in the body near your lymph nodes) and breast cancer.

Some sunscreens are less toxic than others (check ewg.org for a Sunscreen Safety Guide), and I have seen a dozen articles in the last few years on connections between cosmetics and serious health problems. A simple, pragmatic place to start is by asking yourself what you’re slathering yourself with and if you can do without some of it.

Exercise and “use,” by which I mean how we use our body these days, is a rich topic, so we’re going to save that one for next time.

Our environment is a serious concern as well, and in this conversation I am mostly referring to all the chemicals around us. A 2007 EPA report stated there are over 82,700 chemicals in daily use in the United States, many of which are insufficiently tested.

Moreover, most are never tested in combination, which, if you’ll remember high school chemistry, is when the really exciting stuff happens! Some of these are surely industry-specific chemicals that you and I will never run across, but the majority of them are on our clothes, on our furniture, under our bathroom sink and off-gassing

from all the plastic that composes our world.

This is one area I avoided discussing with my clients for years, because I felt it to be overwhelming and didn’t feel I had many solutions to offer. I’ve realized, though, that this is also an area where simple, pragmatic changes can have a huge impact. I don’t know about you, but my Grandmother cleaned her entire house with bleach and vinegar water. None of us need the 30 fancy cleaners under the sink.

Environment here can also refer to all the research showing better development and health in kids who get to be around trees, who go outside. Oh, and by the way, just because you’re grown up already doesn’t mean it isn’t good for you to get outside.

Many epidemiologists agree we get the flu more in winter because there’s less sun, and when we go outside our skin is covered, so

we can’t synthesize vitamin D, an essential precursor to immune cells. Simple solutions: go for a walk, hug a tree, get full-spectrum light bulbs.

As your inventory continues with your physical self, look for small, simple things you can change so you avoid overwhelm. Don’t pull a New Year’s resolution stunt and try to change too much too fast. Start with little things. No change is too small, and they all add up. Health is a process, not a destination, and the more little things you incorporate, the healthier you’ll be, the better you’ll feel and the longer you’ll be around for us to enjoy you.



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that can take care of each other in hard times means people have to relearn a lot of the skills of working together in shared spaces to reach shared goals, and helping each other gain practical skills in a hands-on way," Watt said.

So, while one could learn to can applesauce on the Internet, Watt added, "listening and talking with people and actually lifting hot jars out of boiling water are very different from interacting with screens and even books."

The Transition Network calls the effort "The Great Reskilling," and envisions moving beyond canning workshops to societal transformation. The network's website proposes "retraining the construction industry to produce [sustainable] buildings using mostly local materials, and raising a new generation of farmers familiar with agroforestry, growing for local markets and relying less on fossil fuels."

For now, more than just peak oil moti-

vates State College residents to join The Great Reskilling as instructors or participants.

"I love making bread because my parents and grandparents and people have known how to do this for a long time. And it tastes better," said bread baking instructor, Ruth Sauder.

"We are learning a lot of these things just because it's cheaper," said Nynke Vanderburg, a participant in Sauder's workshop. "I like making my own things because I know where they come from. It's satisfying, and you don't use all the packaging."

For Watt, Spring Creek Homesteading is all about preparation for a day when we can no longer take for granted items such as Indian spices and store-bought applesauce.

"I'm especially motivated by my kids and other kids," she explained in an email, "to transform my anger and despair about being left such incomprehensibly huge ecological and economic messes into a steady resolve to be an active part of the generation that turns the corner to begin healing the planet and our social and economic systems..."

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The support group, she added, focuses on doing just that by offering parents a chance to lead the discussion, get second opinions and resources from the facilitators and ask questions that they may not be able to during a regular visit.

Although eating disorders are not just about an unhealthy relationship with food, Kaufman said, the parents' daily concern about their children's calorie intake can manifest itself in group discussion, requir-

ing the facilitators to occasionally "redirect" the focus of discussion to examine the deeper motivations of why a child feels he or she should not eat and how a parent might confront that problem.

Since it began, attendance at the meetings has been, according to Kaufman, "small but consistent," something she partially attributed to parents' unwillingness to talk about the problem, but also on busy schedules and the added commitment of taking care of a child with an eating disorder.

"It's a 24 hour job, if they're doing it right," she said, adding that the idea of com-



Photo by Marisa Eichman
Mary D. Watson, Founder and President of the Board of Directors for the Arms for Peace Family Memorial, and Merle Wertz, Commander of the American Legion Post #867, performs the dedication of the Memorial at the American Legion in Pleasant Gap, Nov. 12. The memorial names Central Pennsylvanians who have died in the wars in the Middle East and the family members they have left behind. More photos at voicesweb.org.

ing to a meeting and discussing eating disorders might seem too stressful to already-stressed parents.

Although no parents were available for comment, Kaufman discussed the importance of the meetings by frequently returning to the idea of group interaction as a conduit of support.

While Whipple and Kaufman think the group would improve if better attended, Kaufman added that she would like to see more nutritionists and counselors participate. She also hopes to see a support group for the children themselves and, ideally, a

support group for entire families.

Kaufman said she views the parent support group—one part of the multi-angled approach of treatment and therapy—as a success in what it offers parents and their children.

"[Parents] feel like their questions are being answered," she said. "They feel like they're not the only ones. And I think that's a big part of this to both the patients and the parents—to know that you're not the only one. There are other people that are going through this too, and you're able to use each other as support."



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