

A collective kitchen in Hamilton has helped build stronger communities as well as healthier individuals.

In 1989, the issue of food and nutrition was addressed in a health survey conducted through the NHCHC. It was found that in people aged 18-34, 38% were not eating a balanced diet. A Collective Kitchen Program seemed to be a possible solution. The program could offer nutrition education and support the community with tools to improve access to nutritious food at a lower cost. A group of 4 to 8 members would meet on a regular basis to plan meals, do the grocery shopping, and cook meals for a total time of approximately 8 hours each month. The total cost of the meals per session would be approximately \$5-7 per person.

In March 1993, the NHCHC and several other local service agencies collaborated to apply for a Health Promotion Grant from the Ministry of Health to initiate a Collective Kitchens Program. The funds were used for capital expenditures (freezers, kitchen equipment, etc.) and as "seeds" for various collective kitchen programs. Prior to the initiation of the Collective Kitchens Program, the facilities at NHCHC were renovated to accommodate a kitchen, especially for this purpose (funds provided by the Ministry of Health).

"We spend time learning from each other and about each other"

Mary has been an active collective kitchen participant for about five years. To some she may even be considered the guru. She knows where all of the best food buys are in town and is on a first name basis with vendors at the local farmers market. She can convert recipes to twelve servings in her head and whip up a mean homemade soup at a moment's notice. It wasn't always this way. Mary remembers when all she wanted to do was, "get out and meet different people and maybe start eating better for my health." Then she met the staff from the North Hamilton Community Health Centre (NHCHC) and realised that a collective kitchen might be the solution to both of her goals. Five years later, Mary is a vital community facilitator for one of the monthly collective kitchens that runs out of the Health Centre.

The Hamilton population includes a number of diverse communities. There is a large number of Spanish-speaking immigrants and refugees living in the Hamilton area and twenty percent of the patient population at the NHCHC speaks Spanish. There is also an increasing number of Vietnamese families in Hamilton. In a report by the Social Planning and Research Council (Diverse Racial and Cultural Groups' Access to the Social Service System, 1990), statistics from the past five years show an increasing number of people of permanent residency destined to Hamilton from Vietnam. These groups are priority populations for the Health Centre. It was felt that the Collective Kitchen Program would be an excellent outreach activity and fill a number of needs for these groups (including reduced social isolation, leadership, skill development and nutrition).

During 1994-1995, community workers were hired to co-ordinate the Collective Kitchen Program, and develop leaders who would offer additional kitchen programs to others.

They began by running focus groups with various Vietnamese and Spanish community groups. They spoke with participants of local ESL (English as a Second

What's cooking?

Language) classes and other social groups. Through this initiative, a Spanish kitchen was started. The women enjoyed cooking and found that the collective kitchen also provided social support with members of their cultural community. It wasn't long before the women felt that they could turn their kitchen into a small business. So, after running for approximately one year, the group decided to create a catering business for various community events. The group is currently self-sustaining.

A Vietnamese community kitchen was started in partnership with a Hamilton Housing ESL initiative. The kitchen was incorporated into the class on a monthly basis. The kitchen group became a teaching tool used by the teacher. The group was modified to address the needs of the population including a Supermarket Safari run by the Hamilton - Wentworth Department Public Health Services. The Health Centre hired a Vietnamese Community Worker to run this group and start other projects. There are currently four different types of kitchens running in the local Vietnamese community.

*" I am eating healthier food and eating healthier food
means I won't get sick as often"*

The isolated elderly were also a concern for the Health Centre. Single, elderly people often have difficulty preparing meals on their own, in a nutritious and inexpensive manner. Social isolation and cooking or eating alone can result in poor nutrition and health in this age group. A Collective Kitchen Program for isolated elderly would help meet the above needs as well as provide a non-threatening social environment for older people to meet one another. As a result, the Ken Soble Lunch Program began in March 1995 as a variation on the community kitchen theme. Seniors in a local apartment building continue to meet on weekly basis to cook lunch for approximately 20 of their neighbours. The group enjoys sharing the meal and discussing current events.

In 1995, the Health Centre initiated the Hamilton - Wentworth Community Kitchen Network, which provides a forum for groups operating kitchens to share their experiences, ask questions and support one another. There are many partners involved with the Collective/Community Kitchens in Hamilton. There are currently 35 active agencies, community groups and individuals involved with the Network. These groups work in partnership to provide training and information to anyone interested in starting a kitchen group.

Due to interest from community members, the Health Centre started two standard collective kitchens, which are open to anyone. Participants have shared with us the kind of impact their kitchen group has had on their lives. One participant said, "A collective kitchen means that I am eating healthier food and eating healthier food means I won't get sick as often." To some, the kitchen means more than stretching the food dollar or eating healthier, "We spend time learning from each other and about each other. These people are now my friends in the community." Kitchen groups are excellent ways of promoting social networks in the community.

Each kitchen group faces different challenges depending on the community it serves. Punctuality, attendance and financial barriers can be issues for some groups. Lack of leadership within the community and challenging group dynamics are issues we continue to work on. "You need a lot of patience to be in a kitchen but it's worth it" says Mary. If you are ever in the neighbourhood on a Friday morning and you smell homemade soup wafting through the air, stop in for a bite. There is always enough for one more.