

Wholesome Wave: Just What the Doctor Ordered

By Tracy Grondine

Funny how successful ideas come about. It takes just one person to think big and outside of the box—someone with passion and energy, who really wants to make a difference. And, of course, it doesn't hurt to have the legacy of Paul Newman backing you.

The Wholesome Wave Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded in 2005, is just that—a big, out-of-the-box idea that has the potential to change millions of people's lives for the better.

Founded by former Agriculture Department Under Secretary Gus Schumacher and award-winning chef Michel Nischan, Wholesome Wave supports increased production of and access to healthy, fresh and affordable locally grown food.

The organization came about when the “King of Cool” himself encouraged Nischan (who co-owned the restaurant “Dressing Room” with Newman) to convey his culinary work and optimistic ideals into an organization where he could help people eat healthier. Newman became one of Wholesome Wave's first financial backers.

With support from a mix of foundations, corporations, government agencies, community associations and universities, Wholesome Wave has a two-pronged approach: provide access to fresh fruits and vegetables to under-served communities, while providing business to farmers.

Under the organization's Double Value Coupon Program, through private funds, people can double the value of their federal food stamps, also known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), when used at participating farmers' markets. The program improves the effectiveness of the SNAP program, as well as the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Farmers Market Nutrition Programs (FMNP) and the Senior FMNP.

What began in 2008 at 12 farmers markets in several states has grown into more than 60 markets in 12 states and the nation's capitol.

Looking in another direction, Wholesome Wave is now heading to the doctor's office. In an effort to contain exploding health care costs, the organization has come up with what it's dubbing as an “Rx for Vegetables.” The program would encourage health care providers to write prescriptions for fresh fruits and vegetables to vulnerable patients. The prescriptions could then be exchanged at local farmers markets for a week's worth of fresh produce.

Schumacher says his goal ultimately is that if patients lower their weight, blood pressure or cholesterol under the new Rx program and are on Medicare or Medicaid, the doctors would then be reimbursed for the fruit and vegetable prescriptions under the new health care bill. Doctors predict that for every 10 points dropped in blood pressure, there's significant savings in healthcare costs.

Wholesome Wave's big, out-of-the-box ideas are not only improving access to healthy foods, they are bringing communities together one by one.

Paul Newman, “The King of Cool,” would be proud.

Learn more about Wholesome Wave at: <http://wholesomewave.org/>.