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What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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From This Garden, Plentiful Food for Thought
by Priscilla E. Hayes



Dorothy Mullen

Walk into Dorothy Mullen's kitchen at supper time and you might find controlled chaos. The raw kale has already been cut off the center stems, the leaves carefully rolled into tight cigars and cut into thin strips. A visitor is about to take sea salt or olive oil and rub the kale until it turns a bright green and is ready to be used in a raw kale salad.

Another guest adds coconut milk to the sauce for the salmon steaks, and Mullen carefully saves out a portion-sized amount of the dish before she adds one of her collection of hot sauces, to accommodate

one person sensitive to hot sauce. A man built like a football linebacker is testing the salad dressing for just the right amount of lemon juice, stevia, and garlic. Someone else is spinning the water in Mullen's tornado machine to make super-purified, oxygenated water for the glasses on the table.

This is the Wednesday dinner meeting of Suppers, a program developed by Mullen for people who want to use nutrition to stabilize their blood sugar and mood chemistry. People who come to Suppers include individuals with Type 2 diabetes and other chronic health problems, those seeking to lose weight, and others simply hoping to develop healthier eating habits. The central nutritional focus for Suppers is reliance on whole foods — vegetables, fruits, and protein sources.

"Suppers is a learn-by-doing program for people who want to have better health," Mullen explains. "It is sometimes hard for people to understand, because it isn't a club, it isn't a franchise, and it is definitely not a business."

There are currently about 40 meetings a month to choose from in central New Jersey, as an individual's schedule and preferences allow. All Suppers meetings are based around the core principle of non-judgment — the notion that the personal healing an individual is seeking cannot take place if that individual feels judged. The principle of non-judgment leads naturally into a prohibition on promotion of any particular diet or brand and complete freedom from any commercial messages.

The 40 meetings per month accommodate a variety of food preferences. The Wednesday evening Suppers meeting accommodates both those who eat meat or fish and those who do not. Other Suppers meetings have more specific dietary ranges, such as vegan or even raw vegan options. The program does not direct participants into any particular diet — rather, each person is introduced to various whole foods and encouraged to do his or her own "Suppers experiments," testing out the impacts of different styles of whole foods eating on individual health conditions.

As an example, Dorothy points to two diabetic members, one a Type 2

diabetic and one Type 1, both of whom reduced their insulin usage significantly through different diets. One member adopted a protein rich diet, the other a vegetarian diet. One of the two, Karen Rose Tank, became so inspired by the effectiveness of the Suppers approach after participating in Suppers for a year that she helped grow the program with meetings for others with diabetes, naming them Suppers for Stable Blood Sugar and Super Low Carb Suppers.

At all Suppers meetings, meal prep and clean up are a community affair; attendees can choose to come early to help with cooking or arrive closer to serving time and help clean up at the end. The only fee is the cost of the shared groceries for the meal, which for the Wednesday evening meeting Mullen manages to keep at \$8 for those who eat meat and a bit less for vegetarians, even though the food used is largely organic, and thus more costly than “conventional” food.

After the meal prep is done, participants sit down around Mullen’s dining room table, opening folding chairs to accommodate more or fewer people on any given night. Mullen “plates up” most meal items in the kitchen with a metered serving of the main courses and places salads or grain dishes on the table for people to help themselves. There is no bread, no alcohol, and no dessert. Hands are held and an opening blessing said, more over the participants than over the food, and then some introductory principles read. Each meeting usually has a specific discussion topic related to personal relationships with food and one’s own body.

What Suppers is doing now is growing. Around 20 people are now trained as facilitators. A non-profit organization, complete with board, is being created.

And businesses willing to embrace the non-profit, non-commercial foundations of Suppers are increasingly stepping up to support the program. Raoul and Carlo Momo, owners of the Terra Momo restaurants, are joining the businesses supporting the Suppers program, without an expectation of any impact on their own bottom line from doing so.

Asked why he supports Suppers, Raoul Momo says, “It’s an incredible educational tool that helps you change the way you eat. We just

weren't meant to eat as we do."

Adds his brother, Carlo: "For me Suppers is about consciousness. People get together and cook; they talk about food, the sources and flavor, and how it makes them feel when they eat it. It's brilliant."

The Momos are joining long time supporters such as Gravity Hill Farm, an organic farm in Titusville, which donates local organic produce and hosts a biweekly lunch meeting. Other longtime business supporters are North Slope Farm and West Windsor Farmers Market, both of which host Suppers meetings highlighting the use of local, in-season produce. The facilitator of the latter meeting runs a yoga class before meetings and is, Mullen says, an example of how people passionate about health use their particular talents to create signature meetings, ones which attract members with mutual interests.

The Whole Earth Center provides a venue for introductory Suppers programs for those who do not feel comfortable coming into a stranger's home; WEC also supports Mullen's efforts to introduce children to healthier eating habits, in an effort to prevent them from developing the health problems that bring many adults to Suppers.

"I am concerned that children are really the same population as adult Type 2 diabetics," Mullen says, "separated only by 20 years of eating a highly processed food supply. My work with children is aimed at preventing the health diagnoses which are the logical consequences of such a diet. I am trying to promote what I call the 'logical miracle,' the health improvements that result from finding the whole foods-based diet that matches your own individual body."

Mullen grew up in Bergen County, the daughter of two schoolteachers. Her father had lost his father to a flu epidemic and had grown food as a child to make sure the family had enough to eat, but the gardening stopped when he got married. Mullen remembers her diet growing up as being "canned asparagus, lots of meat, and iceberg lettuce."

After earning her bachelor's degree from Upsala College, then in East Orange, New Jersey, Dorothy went on to be a "chronic volunteer," as she married and raised three children. She found herself developing health problems, including crippling joint pain, repeated infections, and

early menopause, that led her to investigate various types of medical and psychological treatment, convincing her that such treatment alone was not enough. At the same time, she served for 10 years as president of the non-profit Foundation for the Advancement of Innovative Medicine (FAIM), which had been started by diet doctor Bob Atkins as a vehicle for educational programming.

She enrolled in a masters program in substance abuse and addictions counseling at the College of New Jersey to find a way to integrate her developing nutritional consciousness with the traditional treatment methods, which stressed either pharmaceuticals or psychological treatment.

“Yes, it was a lonely process at first,” Mullen recalls. “I wrote an 80-page unassigned thesis on biological individuality in alcoholism, which the head of the counseling department at TCNJ was willing to read. Red flags about the relationship between addiction and poor blood sugar regulation popped up all over the nutrition literature, but at that time you couldn’t Google search material that straddled disciplines.”

But, Mullen says, “the department at TCNJ embraced me, in spite of the fact that I was a self-declared enemy in the territory of their discipline.”

It was during a conversation with department chair Mark Woodford, when she heard herself saying that what the addiction treatment culture needed was a “Suppers for Sobriety,” that Mullen understood what she was going to do. The Suppers program started with recovering alcoholics and moved on to address other health and mood issues. Mullen has documented many Suppers case studies both on the Suppers website (www.thesuppersprograms.org) and in her newly released book, “Logical Miracles,” which recounts the stories of 130 people who have used the support of the Suppers program to turn their lives around.

Some of the examples of the unpredictable results of promoting non-judgment include a facilitator whose relationship with her mother-in-law was completely transformed after she practiced non-judgment in the context of Suppers, and an individual whose husband was totally resistant to healthier eating until she stopped criticizing his eating

habits. One of the most spectacular successes from the program was a person who lost the diagnoses of fatty liver, high triglycerides, high blood pressure, and Type 2 diabetes in less than six months without medication by conducting Suppers food experiments and adopting dietary changes.

Suppers is indeed growing. Princeton area healthcare practitioners are referring patients to Suppers to find the support and further education to actually make the healthy changes that they recommend and prescribe.

Mullen is particularly excited by the infusion of “commercial angels, who understand that to succeed at significant change, Suppers must rely on commercial relationships, but not commercial messages.” She is looking forward to the next step, offering Suppers in business settings as part of a wellness program, one that doesn’t promote particular diets or services. Already, one member has taken the program to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection so that people with only their lunch hour to spare can benefit from it.

“It’s really a case of enlightened self interest,” Mullen says. “Good health is the basis for everything.”

For more information visit www.TheSuppersPrograms.org, Dorothy Mullen’s book, “Logical Miracles,” is available at Amazon.com.