



AROUND THE CORNER TO BETTER HEALTH: Cultivating Healthy Corner Stores in Milwaukee



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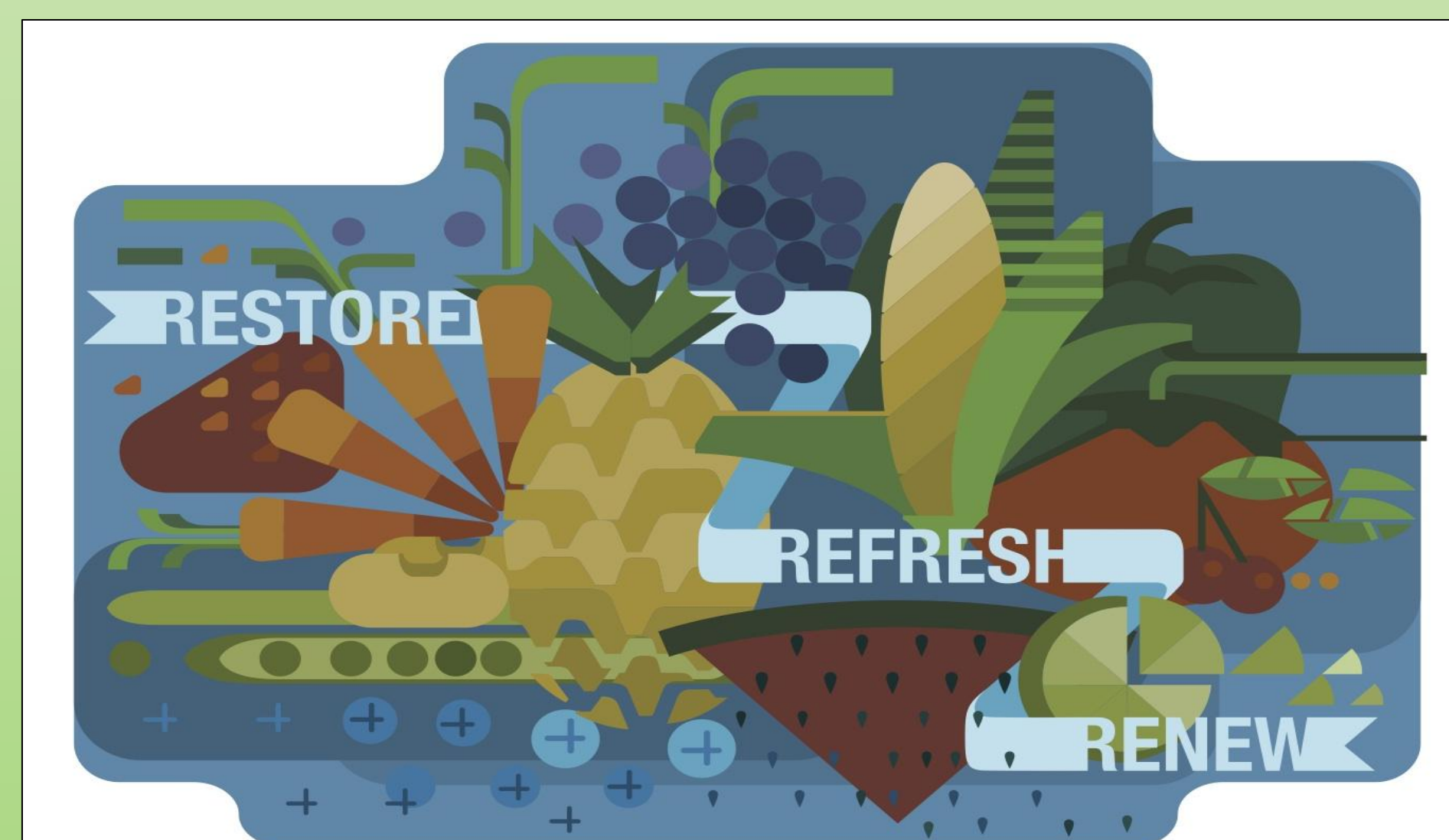
INTRODUCTION

This community-academic partnership pairs a previously existing neighborhood-based “Healthy Corner Stores” coalition with four central city corner stores and partners from the Medical College of Wisconsin and the Milwaukee Health Department.

The project goal is to increase healthy food availability in Milwaukee’s central city through demonstration projects related to:

- Improving store **infrastructure** to support stores’ abilities to stock fresh food (e.g., the purchase of coolers for storage/sale of fresh produce)
- Targeted **marketing** efforts to increase sales of produce in the stores
- Improved access to **distribution** channels which offer affordable locally grown fresh produce

Additionally, through engagement with our project partners, we have focused much time and attention on helping participating storeowners to **navigate complicated city regulatory guidelines**; and have developed/delivered a 6-week “**Youth Food Justice**” program.



Mural design for a mural painted on exterior wall by youth from the Boys & Girls Club (a coalition partner) in the summer of 2012



Project coordinator, Alex Barnett, conducting a food sampling at a community garden

THE PARTNERSHIP

- **Community-based project coordinator** – works for Walnut Way Conservation Corp (nonprofit organization near the four stores); serves as liaison to the four store owners; she leads program activities within the stores, helps store owners access healthy food, sources project-related products (e.g., affordable grant-funded coolers), conducts food sampling at neighborhood activities and within the corner stores.
- **Evaluation/grant management team** – comprised of representatives from MCW, Walnut Way Conservation Corp., and City of Milwaukee Health Department; members regularly review grant progress, develop evaluation tools, disseminate project results, plan program implementation.
- **Coalition** – diverse coalition of community partners who provide insights related to food access, business strategies, project activities, and marketing, among other topics.

METHODS AND RESULTS

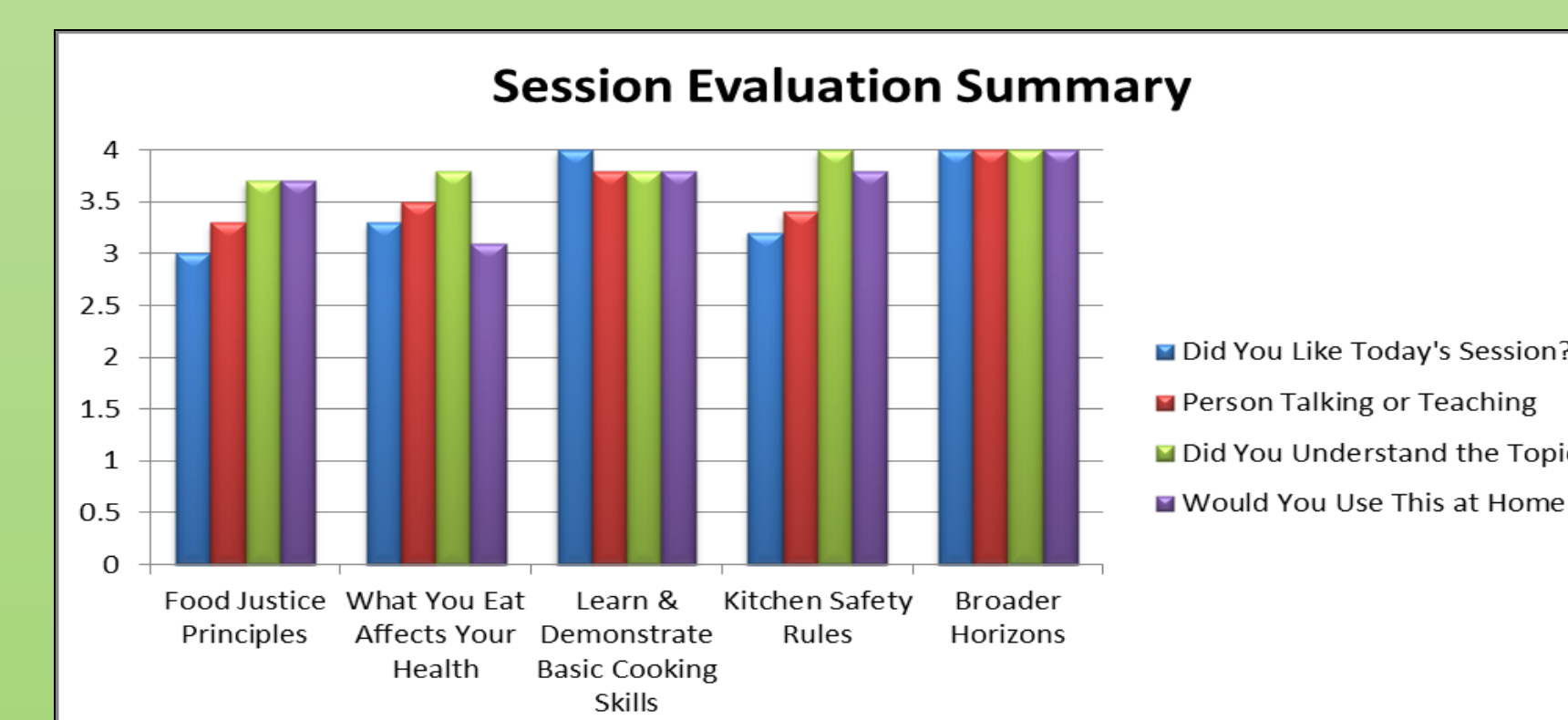
We have used, and will use, the following methods to measure project success:

Structured Interviews Pre- and Post-project **interviews** with corner store owners to describe their attitudes and practices related to stocking and selling healthy foods, especially fresh produce. Baseline interviews (n=5; one storeowner left the project after the first year) revealed store owners’ perspectives on the sale of healthy food.

Key findings include:

- The stores are small businesses with staffs of 2 - 4 people; store sizes range from 1,000 – 3,300 square feet
- Factors impacting sale of produce include: need for adequate refrigeration (including the issue of wasted inventory), consumer demand, need for effective marketing of produce, cost of produce, need for equipment upgrades (coolers, expanded kitchens)
- Stores stock a wide range of dry foods, refrigerated meats and cheeses, condiments, drinks, baby food, fresh produce, and other items (toiletries, candy, cigarettes, beer, liquor, hair products, diapers)

Youth survey– A 4-item **satisfaction survey** and pre-post **knowledge assessment** for youth participating in the “Food Justice” series. Youth attendees responded favorably to the 5-week “Food Justice” series. The graph below is a composite of results of the 4-item tool from all 5 classes. On a scale of 0 to 4, with 4 being the most positive, most answers indicated a positive response to the all five sessions.



Quotes in response to “**What did you learn today?**” include:

- “*I learned about new vegetables and fruits and I also tasted it.*”
- “*More about my community.*”
- “*Making organic, natural juice is really good!*”

Consumer survey – Results of a **consumer survey** related to produce buying habits in corner stores conducted in the four participating corner stores. Of the respondents (n=29), 17 purchase produce at the corner stores. Those who do not gave the following reasons for not purchasing produce at corner stores:

- “*Just because*”
- “*No reason*”
- “*Not always fresh*” (2 respondents)
- “*Never thought about it*”
- “*Always go to Aldi’s*”

Based on these results we believe effective marketing, especially through the harvest season when fresh produce is abundant, could improve sales of produce.

PRODUCE SALES



Bi-weekly **photographs** of store produce inventory and brief discussions with storeowners about produce sales provide a visual representation of how well produce is selling in the stores. This “**produce journal**” will complement quantitative measures (via review of receipts documenting stores’ purchase of produce) of produce available in the stores; it proved challenging to consistently gather accurate and uniform quantitative documentation from storeowners.

LESSONS LEARNED

Central to our findings thus far are lessons learned as a result of implementing the program in the stores:

- Offering fresh, minimally processed produce requires an understanding of **complicated city codes** related to weights and measures, labeling, and pricing.
- Partnering store owners (none of whom are the owners of the buildings which house their stores) are not in a position to make investment in the facades of the stores; **building owners were often unwilling to make façade changes** for fear of increased property taxes.
- Provision of healthy food requires commitment of additional time/resources into training of staff; **most staff in the partnering stores do not have food prep skills** needed to offer even the simplest of healthy foods, such as containers of melon chunks.
- As the liaison to the store owners, the **project coordinator shoulders a great deal of responsibility**. It is challenging for her to accomplish the project objectives, and resolve complicated issues, in only 20 hours each week.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently in month 22 of a 2-year funding period, *Around the Corner to Better Health* is in the midst of harvest season, when fresh produce is abundant, and project marketing activities are fully implemented. To date, the project has provided great insights about the myriad issues related to improving healthy food access in four urban corner stores. In several months we will have final project results (final survey results, complete produce journal, post-interviews with store owners) to fully describe the findings of our intervention.



Anthony Long (right) conducts a juicing demonstration outside Rainbow Foods, a participating corner store