

Milk *from the* Heart

Working to Eradicate Food Insecurity from Inside the Heart of New York City

by Lee Erica Elder

Times are hard for Oscar Palacios. The Bronx resident lost his job two months ago, and his wife was let go from her job last week. While they look for work and file for benefits, putting food on the table for themselves and their 12-year-old daughter is now that much more difficult. But Palacios sees signs of hope, as do thousands of other New York residents benefiting from the Milk from the Heart program, which provides free milk to low-income families with children.

Now more than ever, families need Milk from the Heart. The Palacios' story is not unique. According to the Food Bank of NYC, more than half of NYC households with children have difficulty affording food. These numbers reflect an alarming growth throughout the United States. The Department of Agriculture (USDA) found in 2008 that 17.3 million Americans lived in households that were considered to have "very low food security." This was up from 11.9 million in 2007 and 8.5 million in 2000. Families with children fare



even worse. They struggle with food hardship at a rate 1.62 times that of other households—24.1% in 2010, up from 14.9% in 2009, according to the Food Research and Action Center.

The impetus for the program came from philanthropist Leonard N. Stern, founder of Homes for the Homeless (HFH), a New York City provider of social services and transitional housing. HFH began piloting Milk from the Heart in the spring of 2010 to address the lack of dairy found in the diets of children from homeless and low-income families, and currently delivers to 16 sites.

The program is designed to make people feel comfortable accepting assistance, rather than embarrassed or stigmatized. “We take data but we don’t ask for names and they don’t need to show I.D.,” Program Coordinator Jonah Nelson says of clients.

Staff, volunteers, and coordinators welcome families and answer questions, translating as needed. With gestures as simple as a smile or handshake, volunteers can show they remember repeat visitors and greet them like old friends. Even the delivery vans are friendly, featuring colorful murals of children from all walks of life.



Above: Founding Manhattan sponsors of the Milk from the Heart program, Leonard and Allison Stern, hand out free milk to New York City families at one of the program's distribution locations.

Below: The Milk from the Heart van parks at one of the program's distribution sites where families are already in line around the block.



“I’ve been with them on a couple of deliveries and this program is going into areas where they’re not getting fully served by some of the existing programs out there,” says Richard Naczi, chief executive officer of the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council, Inc. “For people that feel disenfranchised, the milk is important, but the outreach is also important, showing people that you care. There is such a face to this program, which is different than some of the more bureaucratic programs. I think that makes people more comfortable.”

The partnerships and connections fostered with local community-based organizations, schools, shelters, and other programs help deliveries run more smoothly and counter the stigma associated with free food programs. Parents at PS 96, mostly Central American immigrants (the school’s population is 76% Hispanic), are initially wary and intimidated, fearing legal trouble if they participate. PS 96 Parent Coordinator Sonia Kemp bridges this gap by encouraging them to get milk and by facilitating workshops on nutrition, immigration, and other topics. “This community is low-income, but because of this economy, we also have some families that have lost jobs, they’re fighting for welfare now—a lot can’t understand what’s happening because they’ve been in a job for so long,” says Kemp.

The project is so successful that parent coordinators from other schools have expressed interest in free milk.

Down on the other end of Manhattan, on the Lower East Side, delivery locations run in collaboration with University Settlement and Educational Alliance, serving a different demographic. The neighborhood is home to a largely Asian—particularly Chinese—population, as represented on the milk lines by grandparents who run households and watch children while the parents are at work, oftentimes out of state.

“Although the Lower East Side is gentrified, there are many families living in multi-generational homes, most of whom are low income or immigrants,” says Magdalene Gomes, director of social services at University Settlement Early Childhood Center. “Unfortunately, we sometimes have to turn people away because we run out of milk,” Gomes said. “When we started the program I had assigned two staff to provide Chinese and Spanish translation. Now I have at least four people working the distribution lines.”

Over at the Educational Alliance, demand grew from 120 families to 240 within two weeks. People line up hours ahead of time,

“Our kids are not eating as well as they should.”

Milk from the Heart by the Numbers

1,000	Quarts of milk given out daily by Milk from the Heart
45	Percentage of people nationally struggling with hunger with incomes above the federal poverty level (Feeding America Foundation)
24	Billions of health-care dollars that could be saved over five years if adults consumed more calcium (Dietary Supplement Education Alliance)
16	Number of Milk from the Heart sites in NYC (13, Manhattan; 3, Bronx)
14	Billions in medical costs for obesity related problems in children, 3 billion of that cost being children on Medicaid (Food Research and Action Center)
4	Number of dollars it costs to buy an average gallon of milk in NYC
3–4	Number of Milk from the Heart daily distribution times
2–3	Servings of milk children and teens should receive per day
3	Percentage of Milk from the Heart clients eligible to receive milk subsidies or milk for their household from a separate NGO or public government program
2	Quarts of milk allotted per household by Milk from the Heart
1	Gallons of milk a family of five needs per day to get recommended dairy servings
50+	Percentage of children ages 2–8 who do not get the recommended daily servings of low-fat or fat-free milk or milk products (American Dairy Association and Dairy Council, Inc.)



Above: Families wait in advance for free milk outside of an elementary school. With the average price of milk in New York City at four dollars a gallon, families are grateful for the free milk they receive.

Below right: A woman and a young child leave the milk distribution site with two free quarts of low-fat milk. More than one-half of children ages two to eight do not get the recommended two servings of milk a day.

that people in these neighborhoods make and what it takes to survive, and we're here to address that gap," says Nelson. "It's an emergency program because of the depth of the problem. Just because you don't meet federal poverty level, which is under \$20,000, doesn't mean you have money to survive, it just means you have a place to stay and possibly some other benefits. The Milk from the Heart program is needed because there are structural problems with emergency food systems on both the city and state levels as well as nonprofit programs."

Palacios agrees. "We try to fill out the forms to get food stamps and try to get another job," says Palacios, whose 12-year-old daughter

needs milk but is ineligible to receive other programs such as WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), which only goes up to age five. "But all the documents take six weeks or

afraid they will not make the cutoff. "There is an immense need," says Stacey Li, director of social services at Educational Alliance's Head Start programs.

Li estimates that most of the families served are living on about a \$22,000 total yearly salary (an average household of four, including two children). "Some of the grandparents come very early, and once they get the milk, they try to go to the back of the line again because they really need the milk for other family members," she says. Older patrons take queuing seriously—playfully using their canes to indicate that no cutting is allowed. "We really appreciate this partnership—it has been a tremendous help to a lot of our parents," says Li.

Families struggle to make ends meet on salaries that are stretched thin, yet often deemed too high to qualify for assistance. "There's a very serious gap between wages





A boy picks up free milk for his family.

Milk Matters

We asked several program participants what milk means to them:

Gisela Suarez lines up for milk every Tuesday because both she and her granddaughter have calcium deficiencies. “The children need calcium, for growing strong bones and healthy muscles,” she says.

Cancer survivor **Luisa Bailey**, 81, says she has to have milk for her breakfast and for her grandchildren, ages five and seven.

Columba Herrera, grandmother to two young children, loves drinking milk, but wants to make sure she has enough for the little ones. “Sometimes, I’m home with no milk in the house, and Naya, two years old, says, ‘Nana, Nana, gimme leche, give me milk.’ I buy five gallons a week,” she says.

maybe more, and we’re still waiting. This program is good for us; I save 10 to 12 dollars a week.”

The cost of living in the New York metropolitan area is also high, so families often choose between paying bills and buying nutritious food. Bert Morales, who gets milk at the 196th Street and Grand Concourse location in the Bronx, and has lived in the neighborhood for 35 years, is currently unemployed and buys about two gallons of milk per week to feed his family of four. “We drink a lot of milk, and it’s expensive, about four dollars a gallon,” he says. “Sometimes you don’t buy certain things because of the expense. This program gives us hope.”

Choosing cheaper alternatives to milk, such as soda or sugary drinks, contributes to the expensive health effects of poor nutrition in low-income families—such as the number of obese children, who often grow into obese adults. “Our kids are not eating as well as they should,” says Naczi, whose organization works to educate families about classroom breakfast programs and other opportunities to improve childhood nutrition. “Kids are overfed and undernourished—we have a strange dichotomy where the portion of children who don’t have access to good food consume food that is inappropriate for them.

“There are a number of areas where dairy would meet nutrient requirements that would help us avoid certain disease states when we get older,” Naczi says.

“A diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and dairy—kids consuming those kinds of diets are not consuming the empty calories: juices or soft drinks with lots of sugar.”

Low-fat milk offered daily by Milk from the Heart aims to ease some of this nutritional burden, according to Mary Story, the program director of the Healthy Eating Research program, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Low-fat and non-fat milk (1% and skim) is a healthy drink, as it’s high in nutrients such as calcium, Vitamin A, D, the B vitamins, and protein, and low in fat and saturated fat, and low in calories,” says Story, who is a professor of the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota. “Low-fat or non-fat milk is a much better choice than soft drinks.”

Programs on the national level like Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign are working to increase awareness of the importance of nutrition and exercise in children, but there’s still a long way to go. “I feel that the milk program demonstrates to families that we care about their nutrition; instead of handing out sugary drinks, or other free food, it’s intentional that milk is being handed out,” says Amanda Leibenhaut, a social worker for Community Schools and Youth Services of The Educational Alliance. “I hope this sends a message to families that we care about their bodily health.”

So what does the future landscape of Milk from the Heart look like? “This is not a social problem, it’s a preventable health problem,” says Stern, founding sponsor of Milk from the Heart in Manhattan, who hopes that more donors will be inspired to step up and offer funds for this much-needed program in other boroughs, and eventually other cities and states. “Without that we’ll see a generation of children who

are less healthy and have shorter lifespans than their parents’ generation—something that we can’t afford,” he says.

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Naczi hopes these programs will receive more funding as well. “We’re cutting back on all types of programs. Based on the commitment we’ve made as a country to doing the right thing, I hope that people find a way to help continue to fund these programs. An investment in the health and wellbeing of our children today will pay major dividends in the future. We cannot be short-sighted. We can invest wisely now or pay much, much more tomorrow.” ■

Jonah Nelson, project coordinator for Milk from the Heart, distributes free milk to an appreciative family after they patiently awaited their turn.



Web-extra

Milk from the Heart in Action

For a complete picture of the Milk from the Heart program, visit ICPHusa.org. A short video shows how the program operates and New York City families explain the importance of Milk from the Heart.

<http://www.ICPHusa.org/webextras/>

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