

Ar. Extension Dietician MaLinda Gray teaches good nutrition. | Write for Arkansas

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Curtailing childhood obesity.

With First Lady Michelle Obama, actor Hugh Jackman and other celebrities getting involved, it is turning into a new national crusade.

Fulton County dietitian MaLinda Gray has an eight year head start.

“How many of you tried the bean dip last month?” asks Gray.

Most of the hands shoot up, as more than 100 Mammoth Spring Elementary school students respond.

“We even tried it at home,” one young student yells out.

“How many of you had never tried bean dip before last month?” Gray asks.

Most hands go up again.

Every month, Gray, who works for the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, meets with elementary students at Mammoth Spring (K to 3) and Salem (K to 6) to introduce them to two new “Foods of the Month,” offer samples of a healthy treat containing the foods and discuss the importance of good nutrition.

“The idea is to interest children in new foods- healthy, low fat, high fiber foods- in hopes they will encourage their parents to try new foods, as well,” Gray explains.

Gray uses a program called, “The OrganWise Guys” to make learning about nutrition fun.

The program, developed in the 1990’s by Dr. Michelle Lombardo, uses a cast of cartoon characters, games, videos and other tools to help young children develop healthy eating habits.

On March 25, Mammoth Spring youth, gathered to learn about March “Foods of the Month,” fish and stems.

Gray explains there are good and bad fats. and fish have good oils that keep the heart healthy.

She calls up a volunteer to hold up a poster showing

“Hardy Heart,” a huggable character who looks like a human heart with eyes and a mouth, gazing longingly at a plate of baked fish.

“I bought a brand new fishing pole and caught a hearty sole,” Hardy Heart says, through Gray, who reads his love poem to fish to the crowd.

Gray also holds up packets of tuna and a can of salmon, and tells students fish from the ocean have the most “good oils” and baked fish is more healthy than fried.

Gray shows off stem foods, asparagus and celery, and explains they are high in fiber and good for digestion.

Another student holds a poster showing off another interesting character, Perry Stolic, who has a poem about the power of stem foods.

Perry Stolic looks a lot like a cuddly purple dinosaur, but is really the large intestine. Never has a large intestine looked so cute.

With the kids all hyped up about fish and stems, Gray says, "I made cheeseballs with tuna, celery and pecans in them and, when you go back to the classroom, you can all taste a sample on a whole wheat cracker."

There are excited murmurs in the crowd as Gray holds up a box of Ritz Crackers, something students all seem to know and love, although they may have never had the better-for-you whole wheat model.

"Don't forget, if you sample the cheeseball, your teacher will give you an "I Tried It!" sticker to wear," Gray reminds the students.

As they leave the multi-purpose room, each student gets a "goody bag," with a paint brush and watercolors to paint a book of healthy foods, a pencil featuring "Pepto" (the OrganWise Guys stomach character), and a round "portion plate" showing five colored slices, representing the food groups. On the back of the plate are stickers of corn, milk, chicken and other foods. Students are encouraged to place a sticker in its correct food group each time they eat.

"Don't just eat in the orange and purple groups (grains and meat). Try to eat something from every color (group) every day," shouts Gray, giving a final reminder to eat a variety of healthy foods.

One other goodie bag item is a blue flyer for parents. It gives them information about fish and asparagus, along with recipes for baked fish and vegetables and a spring vegetable saute.

Do students try the new foods?

"Pumpkin muffins, we ate them all up," a girl replies.

"I like some of it but I don't like tomatoes," a boy chimes in.

Is this program worth taking children out of the classroom for an hour each month?

"The children all like going to hear the "Foods of the Month" program, and they are all pretty good about trying the food sample," said third grade teacher Lacy Lingenfelter.

"They really liked the little pumpkin muffins," Lingenfelter added. "The sweet potato casserole wasn't quite as big a hit. I guess it's more of an acquired taste."

Gray, who made eight cheese balls for the Mammoth Spring students and will make 21 to serve Salem students, admits buying the ingredients and making enough samples for 650 kids is a little challenging.

But she insists it is worth the effort. The reaction to "Foods of the Month" dishes are one way she can tell the kids are developing a taste for foods they haven't had before.

"Parents will call and say, 'what was that recipe you made at school? My child said it was really good,'" said Gray, "or I'll see kids at the supermarket and they will say 'what's the next food of the month?'"

Another sign that the nutrition program is beneficial is the fact, it initially was limited to third graders at Salem but, as teachers in other grades learned about it, they wanted it for their students, as well.

Next year, Gray will have even more food to prepare each month.

"We are expanding to the Viola schools next year."

