

Local Mom Organizes for Organic School Lunches

An interview with Vanessa Ruddy, Olympia, Washington

Beyond Pesticides interviewed Vanessa Ruddy of Olympia, Washington, a parent and active member of her school community, who has been instrumental in establishing an organic school lunch program in her child's school and has led the way for other schools in the community, state and nation.

BP: How did you get interested in organic food?

VR: My interest in healthy foods began 35 years ago when I was 15 years old when I became a vegetarian. I attended boarding school in England and while there I did not have many healthy food choices. The British had the worst food and reputation for bad food, equal to America! As children, we were fed white bread and processed cheese. I actually grew up living on three continents and I found real food in other countries!

I never ate school lunches here in the U.S., but my sons, now 25 and 12 years old, did. My first son loved to go to school partly because while there he got to eat junk food. However, my second son went to an independent school, ages 4-9, where we decided to have a healthy food policy for the children.

BP: Describe the school community.

VR: We became aware of an alternative school in Olympia, Lincoln Elementary, where my younger son started in the second grade. Although it is considered a progressive school, I was surprised and disappointed to find the same school lunch menus as the other schools. This was happening in a school where children are taught about social issues and environmental education, they have a school garden, wetland and a pesticide-free school lawn. The principal is quite savvy about protecting children from toxic "evils" and poor nutrition.

Every day at Lincoln children complained about the school lunches, calling it disgusting, poison, etc. The lunch consisted of fried and sugary foods that a lot of the kids had no choice but to eat because of the free lunch program. I realized that this would be the perfect place to set up a healthy school lunch and then considered the idea for about a year before taking action.

BP: What steps did you take to initiate the change to organic?

VR: I began by placing a telephone call to the supervisor of the school lunch program. He sounded very friendly. I was imagining an 80-year-old institutional ogre, which was not the case. I identified myself as a parent at Lincoln, and asked if we could improve the school lunch program. He got excited, "Yeah, great idea. I'm busy now, but get back to me." With that I assumed that

I was going to have to do all the cooking and meal planning, so I waited until I could get others to help on this big project. Before the completion of the school year (2001), I asked to put up a sheet to recruit any parents interested in changing the school lunch program. Cheryl Petra, the principal, welcomed this request, and about 20 people put their name on the list to help.

BP: Were the decision makers responsive?

VR: I called the supervisor again in September. While on the phone he said, "what would you like to do?" Wow! He was giving ME the options. My mind raced—what do I want? Heck, "How about organic foods for starters?" He replied, "Let's set up a meeting." It is helpful that he is from a farming background, and therefore knows more about food production than most school lunch program supervisors. To arrange for the distribution of organic food to the school, he arranged a meeting with Washington State Department of Agriculture's (WSDA) Small Farms program coordinator, a representative from Charlie's Produce in Seattle, and a distributor of organics in western Washington. At one of the meetings, the WSDA coordinator brought samples of foods I had selected. The cost was reviewed and some reallocations were made. We found that money for the desserts could be allocated to organics.

BP: Was there a lot of parent involvement?

VR: For me, this was all a dream coming true. Although parent attendance decreased as we continued to have meetings, their interest did not. They supported me 100%.

BP: How long did it take to set up the program?

VR: By October (one month later), the supervisor agreed to use Lincoln Elementary as a pilot program. With that, a six-foot salad and fruit bar was rolled out, with a sign that said "Organics." A cafeteria worker said, "Vanessa, you would have thought it was Christmas, the way their eyes lit up." Only one overweight child complained about no desserts.

BP: Were there other activities that spun off from this?

VR: To ensure that the organic program would last, we set up meetings on a regular basis. I engaged the teachers by asking them if their classes would like to learn about organic food and why it is important. We also decided to come up with a children's health manifesto. This was met with excitement from the kids. An open meeting was held once a month with the principal, supervisor of



the school lunch program, anyone else interested, and me. We also met with local farmers to discuss opportunities for possible local farm involvement with the program. The outreach to the farmers enlarged the goal to become twofold: support local farmers while feeding the children better food.

BP: How did this program support the community?

VR: After the fruit and salad bar had been successfully running for two months, I thought the larger community needed to be aware of this and I contacted the media. Once the story appeared in the papers, TV reporters came down from Seattle. I contacted National Public Radio (NPR), which agreed to do a story. The interviewer was amazed at how “savvy” the kids were on pesticides. The media attention helped spread the word and allowed other parents who dreamed of having organics in their school see it was possible. By the end of the year, nine out of the ten elementary schools in Olympia had organic school salad bars. They were asking to be put on the list. Some cooks complained, and some school cooks refused. The media attention reached USDA school lunch program officials in

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Washington DC. They sent a representative out to Olympia to give our school and everyone involved a certificate.

BP: Where do you go from here?

VR: I recently visited Berkeley to research their organic food policy, which includes a nutrition education program for the whole community, something I am trying to introduce in Olympia. In Olympia, money is one of our biggest limitations. Berkeley’s program includes a staff member who writes grants—they received a \$500,000 grant. They also have a nutritionists on staff. In my research regarding the presence of school nutritionist around the world, I learned that the U.S. is the only country that does not have a nutritionist writing the lunch program, where it exists. Instead of a nutritionist, our country is told what to do by the food industry. Local supervisors do have autonomy and choices, but if they are not educated in food matters, then it’s tough luck for the children.

BP: Do you have any advice for parents?

VR: My advice to parents interested in getting organic food into their child’s school is this: Do what I did; go to the media and don’t stop! Get people on your side and gather information. There are plenty of websites with resources. With assistance of an intern from Evergreen State College, we have completed Olympia’s data report called *Revitalizing the School Lunch Program* Download the report at (http://osd.wednet.edu/media/schools/A_Salad_Bar.pdf). Network and find people who can work together with you on this issue, and don’t forget about the importance of educating the kids about organics.

*Veronica Ruddy is a parent of a sixth grader at Lincoln Elementary School in Olympia, WA. She can be reached at vanessaruddy2749@hotmail.com. For more information on organics in schools, see *Beyond Pesticides’* article (Pesticides and You, Winter 2004-05) on organic school gardens at www.beyondpesticides.org or contact *Beyond Pesticides* for a copy.*