HEALTHY DAYS

DOING WELL DOING GOOD A NEW YORK CITY CHEF IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE ONE SCHOOL LUNCH AT A TIME. SYLVIE BIGAR REPORTS.

"I had no idea what was in store," says Bill Telepan, chef/owner of Telepan in New York City, "when I asked the friendly bunch of moms handling out sandwiches in front of P.S. 87, my daughter's school in Manhattan, 'What can I do to help?'

The chef was introduced to one of the mothers, Nancy Easton, who turned out to be the executive director of Wellness in the Schools, and before he knew it, he found himself attending one of their meetings, together with other parents, kids, school administrators, and even a representative from the Department of Education.

"They were doing great work," he says, "but I saw what else could be done so that kids would eat better."

Soon, Telepan became a committee regular, and with Easton's support, decided to launch three "healthy days" in the ensuing months. "The school manager and I feasted through their 'official' foot-thick recipe book. We planned a salad bar day, a healthy sandwich and hormone-free milk day, and a vegetarian chili day."

Telepan tinkered with some of the recipes, took sugar out of dressings and bottled salsa out of chili, and made everything he could from scratch. That year, with the help of only eight volunteers, the group implemented the three healthy days concept at three schools.

"At the beginning," says Telepan, "kids would say 'Oh that's gross,' but after a few months, cooks were going around the classrooms distributing little cups of food, and the kids would go, 'Wow, that's delicious.'"

One year later, it would be three healthy days at eight schools, and the tweaking of the recipes continued as they were introduced to new schools at what we called 'Wellness Cafe Days.' By this point, we had 40 volunteers, and me."

Then, buoyed by its successes, the group took the leap and decided to produce a complete three week template of recipes and menus, aiming for 18 schools. They had confidence and strong anecdotal results. But how to launch this on this large a scale?

"We based our model on Teach for America, and with the help of the New York City Department of Education's Office of School Food, hired graduate students to be in the kitchen every day," Telepan says. This became the "Cook for Kids" program. The graduates learned to collaborate with the school cooks and to retain them to cook from scratch.

Telepan and Easton soon realized that educating kids about their efforts had become crucial, so they developed what they smilingly dubbed a "Lab": the culinary graduates hijacked the science lab for a week and taught basic farm-to-table cooking, from describing the various varieties of potatoes, to explaining what you can do with them, which potato recipes would be served, tastings, and distributing recipe cards children could take home to cook with their families.

Everything changed when the children started to know a cook and could begin to trust that person. "From that point on," says Telepan, "the barriers fell." "We hire culinary students from all the great schools," says Easton, "people who care about food but also about education and what they can do to fight obesity."

For the 2011-12 year, the goal is to work in 30 schools, and the roster of chef talent includes Jonathan Waxman, John Fraser, Sue Torres, and Mary Cleaver, among others. "Today, we touch 15,000 children," says Telepan. "It may seem like a lot, but New York City public schools feed more than 860,000 kids per day!"

Telepan spends 15 to 20 hours each week volunteering so that public school children can eat better. And what's in it for him?

"I am now the executive chef for Wellness in the Schools," he says proudly. "I got a title."

Sylvie Bigar is a New York City-based food and travel writer.