

Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids Chaves County Lake Arthur

In Lake Arthur, an isolated rural town of about 400 people in southeastern New Mexico, residents have to drive 25 miles to the nearest grocery store. Fresh produce is a rare commodity.

That is changing.

The Healthy Kids Healthy Chaves County Initiative is creating sustainable changes that make it easier for people to lead active lives and eat healthy food.

Jane Batson, who has helped lead Healthy Kids Healthy Chaves County, has established partnerships with the schools, a Roswell grocer and local residents to increase people's access to fresh fruits and vegetables in Lake Arthur through school and backyard gardens, a farmer's market and food-buying clubs.

Lake Arthur has been hungry for change, Batson realized, but the community didn't know how to make that change happen.

"This has been an opportunity to bring a little more structure and support as community leaders have made that happen," said Batson, who is interim assistant vice president for external affairs at Eastern New Mexico University – Roswell. "We have been there to support putting those pieces into place."

Key Community Successes

October 2011 - June 2013

- All 67 students at Lake Arthur Elementary participated in the 5.2.1.0 Challenge this past year
- Established edible garden at Lake Arthur Elementary
- Began Fruity Tuesdays as an affordable way to provide fresh fruit to all 138 K-12 students at Lake Arthur Municipal Schools
- Increased rural community access to locally-grown produce by beginning a farmer's market in Lake Arthur and expanding reach of Bountiful Baskets food buying club

Community transformation in Lake Arthur has, to date, focused primarily on access to healthy produce in a sparsely-populated rural food desert.

Nearly all (436) community members, including 100% of elementary school children, have increased healthy eating opportunities due to these efforts.



Every Tuesday morning, Lawrence Brothers IGA, Roswell's local grocery store about 40 miles away, works with Batson to provide fresh fruit to the Lake Arthur Municipal School, where 138 kids from preschool to 12th grade attend.



The store provides mangos, apples, oranges, kiwi and other fruit for all the students to sample on Fruity Tuesday. Some students bring extra money so they can purchase fresh fruit to take home to their families.

"This allows the students to get something fresh they wouldn't otherwise," Batson said.

Batson brought the Santa Fe-based nonprofit, Farm to Table, to the Lake Arthur school to teach students how to make a garden. They made starter kits with kindergarten through sixth graders.

"My elementary kids were able to take the starter kits home so their families can grow the food," said Marisa Pisana, school nurse for Lake Arthur Municipal School for 13 years.

Middle-school students repotted the plants and will bring them home so families can start their own garden and sell the produce at a farmer's market beginning in July.



Windowsill garden at Lake Arthur Elementary

"The kids are so excited," Batson said. "They have been involved in the planning for the market, gardens and Fruity Tuesday. The community has been searching for a way to promote economic development so they see this as a start to something bigger on the horizon."

Pisana said a handful of parents plan to come to the market to sell their food. "Parents are very excited because we have nothing in Lake Arthur as far as a store, and this is a way for them to buy or sell their goods," she said.

This is Lake Arthur's first time trying a farmer's market that will consist of about 20 vendors who are growing fruits and vegetables in their gardens. The market will be scheduled when there are popular six-man football games on the weekend.

"Football is big here," Pisana said. "To get people, that's what you do."

Susan Alston-Richardson helps teach the kids at Lake Arthur's school about how seeds grow and what they need to become plants. As a retired teacher, she appreciates the children's enjoyment as they watch their plants grow and are ready to share them with their families.

"They come home all excited about their plants and the gardens and then they get the parents interested in doing a garden," she said. "So it builds on itself."

Alston-Richardson and her husband Michael Richardson own a 15-acre farm and retreat center on the eastside of Roswell called Enchanted Farm. She said her husband's dream is to give back to the community. To fulfill that dream, the pair set aside plots on their farm where people can grow their own vegetables.

The couple offered their land, fertilizer, water and compost starting this spring. So far there are eight plots where people, including a local chiropractor, a Methodist church and Boy Scout troop, are growing fresh produce. Some plan to sell their crops at the Lake Arthur farmer's market, she said.

"I think what we would like to see is a sense of community and people getting together to do something that's good for them, to grow food that is good to eat and they know where it came from," Alston-Richardson said. "We want them to have a sense of pride in being able to feed themselves and their families with the fruits of their labor."

Richardson visits the plots each Saturday to help people who need it, and the growers are learning from one another, his wife said. "Homegrown stuff always tastes better. That's what I'm hoping Lake Arthur families will find," said Alston-Richardson, a registered dietician.

If the shared land is successful, she would like to establish a CSA (community supported agriculture program) in which people order a box of fresh, local produce that she delivers from her farm to the Lake Arthur farmer's market.

"I think Jane and her group have done such a wonderful job of infusing the community with something it doesn't have because it's so far out," she said.

In addition to the community gardens, Chaves County residents are able to buy fresh fruits and vegetables through Bountiful Baskets, a national food co-op that delivers weekly to Roswell. Plans are in progress for a site in the Dexter, Hagerman, and Lake Arthur area.



There are more than 125 families receiving produce through the all-volunteer co-op that provides \$15 conventional baskets and \$25 organic baskets of produce.

One key factor in Healthy Kids Healthy Chaves County's successes is the breadth and diversity of the people involved, Batson said. "It's a huge number of people," she said. "Those people are influential in their various spheres."

"A lot of people want to have a healthy community," said Paula Camp, who coordinates the initiative supported by the New Mexico Department of Health.

"They want the people who live in Chaves County to have a better quality of life, and I think they realize you can do that through nutritional eating and healthy activity," Camp said. "I've been amazed at the people who have been coming out to help us."

Camp and Batson, with their extensive volunteer crew, have focused on planning sustainable programs, including seeking additional funds to support ongoing healthy food and activities. They envision changing the culture around eating and activity for the communities of Chaves County – Roswell, Hagerman, Lake Arthur and Dexter.

"We want lasting, building, sustaining relationships with these areas," Camp said. "We want to know these people, know what they want and what they need and let them know how we can help them and how what we're encouraging them to do can bring them a better quality of life."