Creating Healthier Communities Through Food Justice in Kensington, Philadelphia
United States of America
Princeton University
Chitra Parikh (United States of America, Princeton University)

Section I: Narrative

The project, which was a collaboration between Thomas Jefferson University's Health Design Lab, Esperanza Health Center, and Sunday Suppers, aimed to create lasting behavioral changes for the participants in order to facilitate long-term health benefits. This was achieved through twelve sessions in a series of dinner – each of which involved an interactive lesson, a physical activity, a meal for the family to share together, and a meal kit. In piloting this program, another goal was to re-activate civic and community spaces in a neighborhood that has been negatively overcome by the narrative of the opioid crisis.

In addition to funding from the Davis Projects for Peace, American Heart Association funding contributed to the project. Funding was used towards buying kitchen supplies, meal ingredients, acquiring the site, etc. In addition, funding supported the creation of meal kits for each family to take home after each of the twelve sessions. These meal kids provided each participating family the opportunity to re-create the meal they ate during the session at home using the cooking skills they have honed through the program.

I came up with the idea for my project by consulting with my primary community partner - Thomas Jefferson University's Health Design Lab. In the summer of 2018, the Health Design Lab, in collaboration with community partners, piloted an initiative known as CoLab Philadelphia. By using an AirStream to travel to various parts of Kensington and offer free health screenings, they aimed to bring health beyond walls. Through various conversations with community members, the Health Design Lab discovered that there was a desire to learn about healthy lifestyles and nutrition broadly. Thus, I came up with my project idea by working closely with community partners to analyze the feedback that Kensington residents provided about what they would like to see in their community. The program I piloted and managed was ultimately titled Recipe for Health.

I believe that the issue my project is responding to exists because of the inaccessibility of basic health-related resources available in communities. When we think of healthcare, our minds temp to immediately jump to expensive healthcare technologies, prescriptions, etc. However, healthcare begins with the social factors that affect a person's well-being directly in their own neighborhoods. Therefore, I believe that the issue of malnutrition in communities exists because there is a lack of awareness regarding the infinite factors that can, in fact, affect your health including but not limited to your built environment and the ease of access to basic needs such as fresh foods, hygiene products, etc.

I chose my host site to work in because I felt as though the neighborhood had been wrongfully mislabeled by the media with regards to the ongoing opioid crisis. With spaces such as McPherson Square Park being referred to as "Needle Park," I felt that the community I chose to work in had not been given the chance to showcase how resilient they are not only as individuals but also as families, neighborhoods, friends and so much more.

Being able to work in my host site was an incredible experience because of the families I was able to develop meaningful relationships with throughout the course of my Davis Project. Kensigton, as a neighborhood, has an incredibly vibrant and close-knit community. Through my conversations this summer, I learned so much about not only the history of the neighborhood and the families I was working with but also about what it truly means to be resilient.

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I did not necessarily feel at any point that the project was not going to work, per say, but while recruiting families to enroll in the program, I worried that hosting twelve sessions might be too much of a commitment for families that are often juggling multiple other commitments. However, through clear communication, we were able to find families who did not view the program as just another commitment - many told me they actively looked forward to coming to Recipe for Health (the name of the program I piloted for my Davis Project).

In communication with people, one challenge I encountered was moderating communications amongst community partners. Since different community partners have different areas of expertise, I especially made an effort to engage other perspectives and stakeholders in conversations about aspects of the program that may have not been their focus, too. I decided to create productive communication avenues by setting up a weekly team-wide call in which all members involved in the previous night's session could share feedback (both about the workflow for volunteers and about the programming offered to the families).

Peace, to me, has come to be defined as building community. When we create spaces in which people feel comfortable and welcomed, we all move towards greater peace in our society. This summer has truly showed me that peace begins very simply – it begins with reflection and a conversation. Peace can exist not just between individuals and groups, but it can also be an internal feeling. One can find peace with their environment just as they can find peace with their past or their emotions.

In the short-term, my project contributes to peace by re-activating a community space (the site of the program) and cultivating an environment in which community members feel both invited and comfortable to express themselves and create meaningful connections with each other. In the context of the opioid crisis, this is especially important because it allows community members who are often labeled as a result of their environment to feel both heard and seen. In the long-term, this project contributes to peace because it facilitates better health and well-being for residents of Kensington by providing them the necessary knowledge and skills to make informed, healthy choices.

This project has certainly changed the way I think about the world in which we live in. Primarily, this project has taught me the importance of simplicity – making a difference in anyone's life whether they are a family member, a friend or a stranger does not necessarily mean making an extravagant gesture. It often means communicating with them to best help them in the way they feel most comfortable. To that end, this project has also allowed me to continue to learn about how impactful storytelling is. This project has changed me by inspiring me to continue exploring the social and environmental factors that affect one's well-being. It has challenged me to recognize and acknowledge the hidden components to our daily lives that impact our wellbeing – whether we realize it or not. Overall, this project has changed the way in which I think about meaningful healthcare. The principles of co-design and iteration that I prioritized in planning and actualizing my project have showed me that it is, indeed, possible to build healthier communities if you keep an open mind.

 "Through my Davis Project for Peace, I learned the key to building healthier communities is engaging with social factors that can tremendously influence one's health, both in the short and long term. This experience has inspired me to focus on better understanding these factors to ultimately be able to intentionally design positive experiences in medical contexts." *Chitra Parikh*

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Section II: Photographs