

# local food matters

by Mary Rosewood

“My piece is teaching kids that magic and love, that sort of nurturing mentality about where your food comes from. And then they love the food, they love these fresh foods that they grow.”

This is how Rachael Jones (“Farmer Jones” to her students) sums up her role as director of the Farm to School program, headquartered at Park High School, which “in a nutshell, is about kids growing food for kids.”

During the school year, 900 lunches per day are served to Livingston School District students. These meals are prepared in the Park High School kitchen by a team of cooks headed by Michelle Carter, the food services director, and then transported to the other schools.

Rachael explained, “We happen to have this greenhouse [the Plant Growth Center] that’s adjacent to the central kitchen. This relationship with food services is so key, because it’s one thing for Farm to School to grow the food, and it’s a very different process to get the food from my buckets and baskets onto the lunch trays. So, we work really closely with all of the staff to incorporate as much of the foods as possible.”

Rachael points out that the kitchen staff is doing a “phenomenal” job, but “that said, I certainly see ways that we can improve meals nutritionally.”

Throughout the school year, students earn academic credit as they learn about food systems and work in the high school greenhouse and the gardens at each of the schools. In addition, an aquaponics system that forms a cycle of plant growth with nutrients supplied by a connected fish tank is being fine-tuned at the high school. Not only are the plants in the aquaponics system harvested and used in school meals, but in May, trout from the fish tank were added experimentally to the menu.

There is also an aquaponics system at Sleeping Giant Middle School, called the Aquaponics Learning Lab. Both aquaponics systems were put into place with the assistance of Montana Roots, a nonprofit in Livingston that focuses on using aquaponics as a teaching tool for creating sustainable food systems.

Most of the hard work of Farm to School comes during summer months. Middle school and high school students apply to work with Rachael during these months and receive a small stipend. The focus is on crops that can be processed and that store well since the goal is to use them during the school year.

Some crops, such as lettuces, are sold to local businesses like Woods Rose, the 2nd Street Bistro, and Livingston HealthCare. Crops headed for the school kitchen are prepared and packaged at the Livingston Food Resource Center (<http://livingstonfrc.org>), a nonprofit that provides a variety of services aimed at eliminating hunger in Park County.

“We’re looking forward to building on that relationship with the Food Resource Center this year,” Rachael said. “We’ll be processing more of our foods – beets, spinach, squash, onions, kale – and we’ll be working closely again with Michelle Carter and processing those however she would like. For example, if she would like to have peeled and diced

carrots, then we will blanch them or steam them, vacuum-seal them, and then we’ll take kids on sales calls to the school district.”

The food services director’s food budget includes 15 percent (“next year we’re amping that up to 20%”) for foods produced in Montana, with the goal of using these foods in at least one of every five meals throughout the school year, not necessarily as an entree, but as an ingredient somewhere in the meal.

“We grew 700 pounds of produce for school meals last year,” Rachael said. “And [this coming year] we’re hoping for a ton, literally 2,000 pounds.”

Michelle buys food from Farm to School



Rachael Jones (left), Farm to School program director, and August Schuerr, Park High School independent study student, stand in front of a piece of the aquaponics system that August is helping build.

based on the value of organic local food produce and USDA commodities. That’s a wide range of pricing, so they meet somewhere in the middle.

Farm to School is unique in that it is a nonprofit functioning within the school district. Because Rachael’s salary – along with the existence of the Farm to School program itself – depends on donations, she tirelessly adds fundraising to her other responsibilities. This is why selling to the school district is a win-win situation. Initially, Farm to School was supported through a USDA Farm to School implementation grant that expired this year, and that funding has not been replaced.

“Farm to School isn’t trying to make money off of the school district,” explained Rachael, “but there’s a value associated with the process and the program, and creating these small revenue streams is essential to continuing to fund Farm to School. Eventually we would like to have ordered production sites where we’ll be able to produce more and more food.”

Rachael, a trained horticulturist, is obviously excited about what the Farm to School program is doing and its potential. She visits classes in all grades during the school year, as an Expert Visitor, and provides plant-based lessons and activities that include hands-on cooking demonstrations. She teaches about food and nutrition using Montana State University’s Harvest of the Month program, which highlights a Montana-grown agricultural product each month.

On June 20, beginning at 6 p.m., there will be a Summer Fun Run/Walk fundraiser that will start and end at Washington School and wind through town for four miles. Get more information about this event and Farm to School in general on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/F2SLivingstonMT>.

To make a donation to the Farm to School program, contact Rachael Jones by email at [rachael.jones@livingston.k12.mt.us](mailto:rachael.jones@livingston.k12.mt.us).