



New London students digest healthy meal message



Bennie Dover Jackson youngsters hear from Food Channel correspondent

By **Julianne Hanckel** --- Published 04/08/2013 12:00 AM

New London - Ninety-five percent of Americans consume the Standard American Diet, a "toxic" combination of processed foods, meat, dairy and eggs that will eventually deplete the planet of its resources, according to The Food Channel correspondent, author and speaker J. Morris Hicks.

Hicks took this message to Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School last week as part of his four-day presentation to all sixth-grade students at the school on healthier eating and sustainability.

"On the planet, there are 6 billion football fields' worth of land that you can grow food on, slightly less than a football field per person for the 7 billion people on Earth," Hicks told the students. "The Standard American Diet requires two football fields per person. If everyone in the world ate the way we eat, we would need two planet Earths, and the last time I checked, we only have one."

Hicks - author of "Healthy Eating, Healthy World: Unleashing the Power of Plant-Based Nutrition," published by BenBella Books in October 2011 - said that in his entire educational career, which spans 10 schools and colleges, he was never taught the consequences of food choice. Tuesday was the first time he took his message to a school-aged audience. During the hour-long presentation, students were receptive to his message, asking questions and participating in the discussion.

Last week, the sixth-graders began to study the benefits of plant-based eating and the environmental impacts of the food choices people make. Their teacher, Elle Hampton, will introduce her students to green smoothies this week as the finale to the unit. She said most of them have never tried the nutritional mixture of spinach, Swiss chard, kale and other vegetables.

She also plans to incorporate quinoa and whole grains in another dish for her students to try. Hampton said she asked her students last week what their ultimate breakfast would consist of and said many of their answers included bacon. This week, she'll ask them again and hopes their answers are modified.

"I've introduced them to factory farming and the way that food is produced today. It's pretty gross, but they're handling it well," Hampton said on Monday before Hicks' presentation. "I don't want to scare the kids, but I want to educate them. My goal for them is that they're eating more plant foods, more whole foods. Not that you have to be a vegetarian or a vegan, but be conscious of what you're eating."

After Tuesday's presentation, student Shawn Brooks said he plans to try to go a month this summer without consuming meat. As part of the two-week unit, he and his classmates read articles about factory farming and the environments animals are kept in.

He said learning about the holding ponds or lagoons that hold thousands of gallons of pig feces, blood, urine, chemicals and drugs near slaughterhouses helped influence his decision. "Factory farms have to give animals medicine, and we're basically eating sick animals. If they can't stand, they can't slaughter them, so they give them medicine to stand," Brooks, 12, said.

Classmate Imani Pound said the factory farms "want you to think they have a nice farm. They want you to picture a red door on a barn and animals running free, not fat, plump animals full of drugs that are sick and that are making us sick," Pound, 12, said.

A small group of students on Tuesday morning said they're looking forward to trying the smoothie but implored Hampton to throw in some fruit to soften the vegetable blow. Others said they're going to take their knowledge back to their families in an effort to start eating healthier.

"I'm talking to my mom about it today. She'll probably think I'm kidding at first," Tahjee Galberth, 12, said of incorporating more plant-based foods into her diet. "I don't want to eat so much meat that it will start affecting the environment. It's my choice. I'm going to ask her to buy more veggies."

j.hanckel@theday.com