



8-4-2009

Pioneering Work by Alumnus Helps Low-Income Access to Fresh Foods

Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Pioneering Work by Alumnus Helps Low-Income Access to Fresh Foods" (2009). *News and Events*. 358.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/358>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

August 4, 2009

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

Pioneering Work by Alumnus Helps Low-Income Access to Fresh Foods

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus Danny Burke has been pioneering making fresh food available to low-income residents.

Burke, who graduated in the spring of 2009, developed a plan for benefits from SNAP, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), to be used at the farmer’s market in downtown Bloomington. Now the Downtown Bloomington Farmer’s Market is one of just nine farmer’s markets in the state of Illinois approved to accept Link cards, which are the cards used to redeem SNAP benefits in Illinois.

“Healthy food is so connected to community development,” said Burke, who earned a double major in environmental studies and Spanish. “If you secure food and nutrition, you help develop a healthier society.”

As a member of the Illinois Wesleyan’s track team, Burke ran through many neighborhoods in Bloomington, and began to suspect several of them were what anthropologists call a “food desert” – pockets in developed countries where no fresh food is available. “Some areas do not have access to grocery stores, only corner stores and gas stations that carry mainly processed food,” he said. Burke decided to focus his senior seminar paper on providing options to alleviate possible food deserts in Bloomington.

Through his advisor Environmental Studies Director and Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and International Studies Abigail Jahiel, Burke discovered the idea of allowing low-income residents to use SNAP benefits at area farmer’s markets. With the help of Jahiel and Deborah Halperin from the University’s Action Research Center, Burke connected with several local organizations, including the West Bloomington Revitalization Partnership, the Heartland Local Food Network, Harvest of Hope, and Downtown Bloomington Association, which operates the farmers’ market. “Danny saw a need and studied and worked to answer that need,” said Marsha Veninga, co-chair of Heartland Local Food Network, who took on Burke as an intern. “He has gone way above and beyond any class project.”

Once his paper was finished, Burke decided to continue the project with his internship at the Heartland Local Food Network. Burke created a proposal to have Link cards accepted at the Bloomington Farmer's Market.

To understand Burke's accomplishment, a quick lesson in SNAP is needed. A few years ago, the federal government required all states to move from paper food stamps to electronic benefit transfers (EBT) for the SNAP program. Illinois converted to Link cards, which can be used in point-of-sale machines (POS), the same machines used at grocery stores to swipe debit or credit cards. "While conversion to EBT had many advantages, it did create a challenge for farmers' markets because the POS machines were costly," said Elaine Sebald, coordinator of the Bloomington Farmer's Market. "Most markets lacked electricity and network access, and there were logistical challenges involved in administering the program for multiple vendors. Danny had to work with the farmers' market to overcome these challenges."

Burke worked to secure funding for a POS machine with a grant from State Farm Bank. "There is an element of dignity to the POS machine I like," said Burke. "Low-income residents go to the same tent, the same machine, as people using credit cards." All people visiting the POS machine at the market receive tokens to be used with vendors. "Everyone – whether using Link cards, credit or debit cards – receives tokens," said Sebald.

The response has been phenomenal, said Burke, who noted the market has already attracted many new shoppers in the few weeks the program has been in place. "It's amazing. Getting people to change their shopping habits is incredibly difficult. But people are coming," he said.

Vendors are benefiting as well, according to Sebald. "Farmers have been commenting that there has been so much more business this year," she said, noting another benefit besides increased business. "Farmers markets are community events. Efforts like Danny's open doors to populations that may never have thought about the market before. The more people are involved, the more it becomes a true reflection of the community."

State Farm Bank is also having Burke document his experiences and create a user's guide that could be distributed to farmer's market organizers around the state. Currently, the Illinois Department of Human Services lists only nine farmer's markets in the state that accept Link cards, with only three downstate. "So many other states have countless farmer's markets that accept SNAP benefits," said Sebald. "Danny's manual will be a huge help to close the gap

between Illinois and other states for including low-income residents at farmer's markets. This has been a great learning experience for Danny and for all of us."

Burke will move on this fall, but expressed hope his project will continue. This fall, he will travel to Washington D.C., where he has been accepted as a member of the Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship, a project of the Congressional Hunger Center in Washington D.C. The fellowship, which accepts only 20 people from across the U.S., works with community-based organizations to battle hunger in both urban and rural areas.

In Bloomington, not-for-profits will still focus on food justice. Halperin said Illinois Wesleyan ARC student, Celina Mendoza, is currently doing her internship with the Downtown Bloomington Association working with the program at the farmer's market, and ARC will spend the fall dedicating students to issues in downtown Bloomington.

"Getting fresh foods to everyone is important," said Veninga, who noted the Heartland Local Food Network has established the Fresh Shares Program with the aim of continuing to provide fresh food to potential food deserts in the Bloomington-Normal area. "Danny has started something amazing that will continue for a long time."

-30-