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"Chef in the Classroom" Brings Healthy Treats to School

Tiny hands of Park Avenue Elementary students made quick work of Mandarin oranges, raspberries, strawberries and blackberries, turning the tasty healthy foods into fruit kabobs under the watchful eye of Chef Lee Burton.

Burton visited the campus this week, the first of 10 Perris schools he'll turn into cooking laboratories as part of the Live Well Perris healthy-living initiative. During the coming months, Burton will instruct hundreds of elementary school kids about preparing, cooking and eating healthy foods.

It's a lesson he's glad to initiate.

"I think we're onto something good here, real good," Burton said as he waited for the first batch of second-graders to amble into the Multi-Purpose Room at the campus near Downtown Perris. "I am excited to be here. We can make a big difference in the lives of our youth. These kids keep me inspired."

Burton is working with the City of Perris, which has developed the classroom-teaching effort as part of its continuing outreach to encourage residents to take charge of their overall health. The City began its "Live Well Perris" program almost one year ago, which has included a community health fair, continuing Saturday morning workouts at Mercado and May Ranch Parks, a walk with the mayor, rides and hikes and aerobic-exercise classes with other City Council members and the creation of the "Biggest Loser Perris" weight-loss contest, which has attracted more than 600 participants.



Chef Lee Burton instructs second-graders at Park Avenue Elementary School about the health benefits of fruit kabobs as part of the City of Perris' "Chef in the Classroom" program.

The program has garnered widespread support throughout Southern California and Perris officials were rewarded with a nearly \$1 million grant to expand the Live Well program until 2016. A second community-health fair will take place April 26 at City Hall, 101 North D Street and includes various health-screenings, healthy-food vendors and the announcement of the "biggest loser" winners.

Aware that good-eating habits should be developed early, Perris officials have kicked off the "Chef in the Classroom" program. It began with fruits on skewers.

Fashioning fruit kabobs seemed all fun but Burton incorporated some important insights into the lesson. He explained the importance of washing fruit and hands to remove germs. He worked in a plug about the antioxidants the fruits contain, explaining that they can help prevent certain cancers and other diseases.

And he mentioned eating fruits "makes you smart, gives you lots of energy and won't weigh you down."



Taking a break from making fruit kabobs, Axel Lizarraga finds time to stick a couple of raspberries to the tips of his fingers.

The 7-year-old kids attacked bowls of fruit with gusto, turning the Mandarins and various berries quickly into colorful and tasty treats. There was enough food for each youngster to devour two kabobs.

Guys like Axel Lizarraga made quick work of his snack.

"I'm about to cry for joy!" he said after munching the last mouthful.

Ask how he would rate the lesson on a scale of 1 to 10, Axel replied: "A ten thousand!"

Emily Salas said she will take the lesson learned and apply it at home.

"There is value in eating fruit," she said.

Kassandra Avalos said she liked the lesson because she "got to make the treat and eat it too!"

"I had a great time," she said.

Comments like that left City officials grinning. They hope the Chef in the Classroom program encourages many students to take home the lessons learned from eating healthy snacks instead of those loaded with salt or sugar.

"We want Perris school kids to enjoy the lessons that Chef Burton teaches—and more importantly incorporate them into their lives and their parents lives so they can all live well!" said Michelle Ogawa, Perris liaison the school project. "That's our ultimate goal."



Angela Villalobos displays her completed kabob.

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