



Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House

Exploring the Impact of Cooking Programs:
It's Not Just About the Food!

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Executive Summary

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House (MPNH) is a community organization in East Vancouver that provides services, programs and community activities for many diverse populations. Our vision is:

“Our community thriving in connection, celebration, engagement and leadership.”

Our hands-on cooking and food skills programs are the focus of our inquiry, as these programs are deeply embedded into most of our work at the Neighbourhood House.

Evaluation

As part of a six-month training course with Dr. Steve Patty and the United Way of the Lower Mainland, the MPNH executive team evaluated how the experience of cooking and sharing of food leads to more connected and included individuals. The team was comprised of the executive director, four program directors and a community developer. Evaluation was based on 26 in-depth qualitative interviews and 62 quantitative surveys, with respondents from diverse cultural backgrounds and ages (youth, adults and seniors).

Theory of Change

Articulating a theory of change for our food programs was a critical step in the process of measuring impact. All our food programs have goals related to food skills, we wanted to understand the impact on participants beyond gaining cooking and nutritional skills.

Findings

The Heart of the House: A Welcoming Place

As a “home away from home,” MPNH strives to provide a safe and non-judgmental environment for people of all ages, and from many language and cultural groups. We examined how people work together to overcome language barriers in the kitchen as the heart of the Neighbourhood House. When participants feel safe asking for help expressing themselves in English, there is space for humour, understanding and collaboration.

The Custom Spice Rack: Intercultural Relationships

Just as spices from around the world create complex flavours, our participants themselves bring richness to group cultural experiences. Areas of language, heritage and lifestyle are embraced and celebrated in our cooking programs, as well as opportunities for shifts in cultural attitudes and understanding. Participants described their experiences of unpacking gender roles and family attitudes related to cooking, empowering younger generations to live healthy lifestyles, and developing lasting connections with people of different cultural backgrounds.

Forces at Work

Group dynamics play a critical role in our food programs, largely supporting the outcomes for participants. Many people felt like they were part of a “team” and reflected on experiences both positive and challenging. People describe learning to navigate the frustrations of “chaos” and communicating in different ways, in order to get along with one another. We found there is potential to train staff and volunteers to facilitate “problem-solving in the family way” and sharing equitably in the work and the enjoyment of food.

Out of the Corner and Into the Kitchen: Catalyzing Reciprocity

Our participants express a desire to give back to others almost immediately, to share skills and knowledge that are rich in personal stories, family recipes, traditions, celebration and much more. We found that not all programs demonstrated the impact of reciprocity as strongly as others, and we aim to explicitly support the goal of reciprocity across food programs.

Pathways

Participants in our food programs indicated that the cooking programs provided pathways to many opportunities—to test new skills, try new things and establish community connections. Whether it be a healthier life-style, a volunteer opportunity, a leadership role, or connecting to other vocational opportunities, participants saw the food programs as catalysts that helped them to take the next step in their goals.

We found that the outcome of reciprocity is interconnected with the principles of adult learning, and we see an opportunity to train our staff and volunteer-leaders to understand and utilize adult learning principles as a way of amplifying the “teacher-learner” paradigm.

Not Just About the Food

Our food programs have proved successful in improving participants’ food and nutrition skills. A more revealing impact, however, is that the food programs are “not just about the food,” but also about creating social connections. Spending time together in the kitchen has helped people to develop strong social networks, helping them to break free from social isolation and connect

with life-enhancing supports such as housing and lasting friendships. We can capitalize on the social networking strengths of our programs by training past participants to become cultural ambassadors, supporting the learning and integration of many participants in our different programs.

The Icing Under the Cake: Mental Health and Wellness

Our participants report that our programs have helped them through periods of loneliness, depression, and other mental illness. The mental health strategy of Canada clarifies that “mental health is different from the absence of mental illness, and is integral to our overall health.” We found that our programs help people find true mental wellness through a sense of belonging and by feeling valued through self-discovery. Participants developed greater personal skills and more resilience that impacted their levels of confidence and self-worth through their attachment to programs, especially for those who followed pathways such as volunteering or leading a cooking class. Participants described areas of personal growth through risk-taking in an accepting environment, and increased self-confidence and feelings of empowerment resulting from opportunities to develop personal strengths through our food programs.

Recommendations and Steps Forward

We expected to find that participants would identify new skills and healthy eating habits, and discuss the impacts of social connection and leadership development. Along with these impacts, we unexpectedly discovered that MPNH food programs are having a significant and measurable positive impact on participants’ mental health.

We have identified the following opportunities for improvement:

1. Adjusting program objectives and bolstering participant supports
 - a. Explicitly framing reciprocity and leadership as program objectives, and integrating facilitator training to achieve these goals.
 - b. Embedding intercultural facilitator training in group dynamics into programs
 - c. Integrating trained volunteers with different language capacities to support participants learning English
2. Establishing a networking/social connections program
 - a. Piloting a program for networking and relationship-building beyond the six- to eight-week cooking programs.

3. Developing a cultural ambassador/peer support training program
 - a. Recruiting and training culturally-skilled participants to systematically support newcomers in skill development, peer support, and role-modelling.
 - b. Integrate mental health and wellness training, along with basic counselling skills and trauma-informed facilitation to support newcomers.

Introduction

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House is a community-based organization located in East Vancouver that provides a range of services, programs and community engagement activities for many diverse populations. Our vision is:

“Our community thriving in connection, celebration, engagement and leadership.”

Of the many programs provided by Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, our hands-on cooking and food skills programs are the focus of our inquiry as these programs are deeply embedded into almost all of what we do at the Neighbourhood House. We wanted to better understand if we are working towards our vision and goals, but more importantly, to learn what are the impacts on the participants. As well we were seeking more information about our successes and where the opportunities exist for learning and growth. Through this process we have discovered that there is a vibrant and resilient beating heart in our house, and it is found, not surprisingly, in our kitchen! Feedback from participants in our cooking and food skills programs demonstrate that the best outcomes are sometimes the unintended outcomes.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of the evaluation was to see how does the experience of cooking and sharing of food leads to more connected and included individuals. The evaluation team comprised of Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House’s executive team – the executive director, four program directors and a community developer—who participated in the six-month Project Impact training course, provided by Dr. Steve Patty and the United Way of the Lower Mainland. Throughout the training, the executive team developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, developed a theory of change, designed and implemented both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze the data.

The qualitative approach included developing an interview protocol (Appendix A) and determining the target and sample size of the interviews. As cooking programs are embedded throughout our programs, it was important that we interview a diverse population sample, including youth, adults and seniors, as well as participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. We conducted 26 in-depth interviews with participants who had been in a hands-on cooking program. Data were collected and we applied a four-step model of textual analysis to each of the interviews. We then worked as a team to identify themes and interpret the data.

We also developed a quantitative survey (Appendix B), which was distributed widely to current and participants who, in the last 12 months, had taken a food skills and/or cooking programs. The survey was distributed by email, within existing groups, and at a public celebration held by Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House in May 2017. Additionally, we translated the survey to Arabic to include the responses of a very recent newcomer group. Our emailed responses were very low, however, the person-to-person or group requests were very successful, resulting in 62 surveys over all. In our last calendar year, over 311 different individuals participated in a hands-on cooking program, such as Food Skills for Families, Cooking Club or Community Kitchens, thus our sample represents 20% of the population.

Intended Impact


Does the experience of cooking and sharing food lead to individuals who are more connected, and contribute to an increased sense of belonging? This was the question that we asked as we explored in detail what our intended impacts were for the food programs, which are as follows:

1. Inclusion: Participants feel welcomed, heard, engaged, accepted, difference is celebrated.
2. Strong social networks: Participants develop multiple sources of support and build relationships with each other.
3. Nutritional wellbeing: Participants experience and integrate foundational healthy food habits, and adapt and preserve cultural food practices.
4. Leadership: Participants share skills and knowledge that leads to increased empowerment, confidence and opportunities for growth.
5. Reciprocity: Participants share knowledge and experiences, expand learning opportunities and build skills for the future. Reciprocity contributes to sustainability for both individuals and the organization.

Theory of Change

One of the critical aspects of this process was articulating a theory of change for our food programs – really taking a deep dive into the features of the programs and the theories behind our approaches. While all our food programs have overt goals related to food skills, our assumption was that they have an impact on participants that go far beyond gaining cooking and nutritional skills. Our theory of change (see Table 1) provided us with a framework that helped us in formulating the inquiry. It also provided leverage points from which to plan for strategies to increase the level of impact for participants.

Table 1: Theory of Change

Program Features		Theory of Change
Create opportunities for expression and experiences of diversity in non-judgmental and approachable ways.		A warm and welcoming space encourages diversity and social inclusion.
Help participants identify their strengths and skill, and we support, mentor, and train individuals to contribute positively.		A strength based approach leads to positive contributions, skills building and personal fulfilment.
Create an environment that is safe, inclusive and supportive and facilitates sharing among participants.		A vibrant social network fosters belonging and connection.
Provide leadership opportunities and tools to support participant-driven initiatives		A responsive environment that nurtures emerging ideas and opportunities
Support people to take leadership roles and take responsibility		Leadership at all levels creates a strong organization

Findings

The Heart of the House: A Welcoming Place

“Neighbourhood houses are a home away from home” is what we hear from many of our participants who attend programs at the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House. The kitchen is the actual heartbeat of Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, where many delicious meals are prepared, conversations are had and relationships are built. Individuals attend our programs for many reasons. What we have learned is that the recipe to getting participants involved is to ensure that the cooking programs are fun, people have opportunities to socialize and the environment is open and welcoming. In illustration of this point, one interviewee said “you feel like you are home, you can ask questions, you don’t feel judged.”

It can be challenging at times to create an open and welcoming space when there are diverse barriers such as language and culture, not enough room in the kitchen, and far too many chefs in the kitchen. When encountering these barriers one participant suggested that “it is important to

respect and not push people when they are learning” thus leaving space for individual experiences.

As time passes, people start to get to know each other, barriers decrease and positive relationships form. Individuals learn new skills from their peers, share recipes from all over the world and enjoy wonderful meals together. An interviewee said “it sometimes is weird because I feel like I live in Mexico in Canada”

Many participants identified language as being one of biggest barriers to being more involved. However, interviewees spoke about ways they were able to overcome communication challenges. Several participants mentioned that the “practical, hands-on training” and the fact that the groups were often broken down into smaller task groups focused on one recipe, helped mitigate the language barriers. Being in small groups “helped me with my vocabulary...made me more confident to share and speak to other people.” Survey responses confirmed this finding, with 88% response rate agreeing or strongly agreeing that the food programs have helped with better communication skills, and 74% to 78% stating they had improved English speaking, reading or understanding.

Feeling safe to ask for help was another key ingredient in creating a kitchen that is the heart of this house. A middle aged Syrian gentleman was participating in a cooking club with a group of other Syrians, when he realized he needed a particular ingredient and couldn’t remember the English word for it. He asked the other participants in Arabic and no one could help him. Our Food Services Coordinator approached him and they started to figure out what he was asking for. He said:

“The gentleman finally says it sounds like finger. There was a lot of laughter as we all tried to figure out what food item sounds like finger...the gentleman was looking for vinegar!”

Sharing and preparing food together can cross cultural barriers that may otherwise seem insurmountable. Interviewees spoke very animatedly about food bringing cultures together and from interviewees, we frequently heard “food is a way to bring people together, to make people close together.”

Significance

Laughter and experimentation create an environment in which participants can flourish and grow. Cooking programs provide common ground where participants build trust and learn to work with others in an intercultural and intergenerational context. The kitchen is a shared space where participants can experiment not only with cooking, but also to practice English in an informal context. Food and culture are the ingredients that create shared conversations, stories

and anecdotes, and humour is the spice that makes each group unique. Humour evolves through the warm and welcoming environment created by the staff and participants themselves. So in this case, lots of cooks in the kitchen is a very positive way to engage and connect people of many cultures.

Possible Responses

We heard that creating a warm and welcoming environment has a positive impact on participants, yet there are challenges as well, especially with language barriers. An idea to increase impact is to involve volunteer interpreters with participants with beginner's English.

The Custom Spice Rack: Intercultural Relationships

Culture is such an integral part of everything we do and offer at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, both intentionally and inadvertently. Perspectives from all our participants are vast and unique, and truly flavour the milieu of our programs and activities. Just as spices from all around the world coming together create new and unique flavours, so do our participants bring richness to group cultural experiences. Not only are the areas of language, heritage and lifestyle embraced and celebrated, but also opportunities for cultural shifts in attitudes are being explored. There were some poignant quotes from the interviews that really highlighted this clearly:

“I increased my comfort in not understanding someone's language and participated by being present.”

“I enjoyed being with different people with a common theme.”

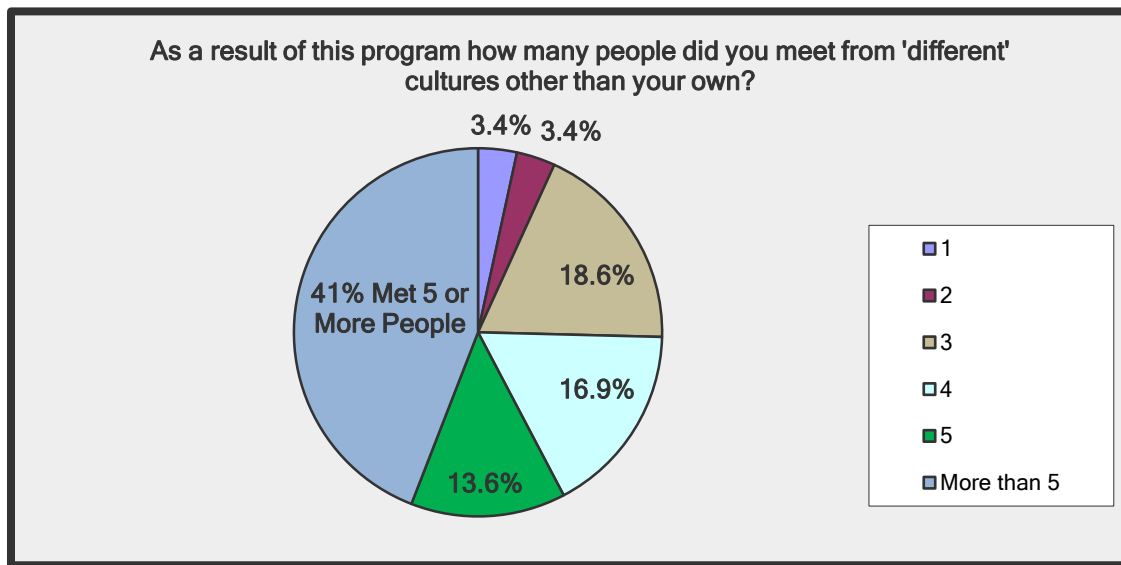
In one interview an individual spoke of his experience back home in Africa where “a man from Africa does not cook.” He mentioned in his interview that he has learned new skills and in turn shifted in his thinking of what is his “role” in cooking and food preparation. He also stated that when he “calls home [he tells his] men friends to go help their wives in the kitchen!”

This paradigm shift also seemed to occur with the mothers who brought in their young sons along to the food programs and community kitchens they attended. They spoke of teaching their sons to be in the kitchen and learn how to cook healthy and nutritious foods. They talked about how it is important for their future and their health, but also important to learn these skills so that one day they can do the same for their families and children. One participant spoke of being “spoiled” as a child because her mother did everything for her, and that she and her siblings never had a chance to learn cooking skills until they had children of their own. She has committed herself to teaching her son these skills as she sees that it is not solely a mother's role to secure, prepare and serve food to their families. She said “I want my son to have a different

experience than me. I want him to know how to take care of himself and make good choices to be healthy.”

As most of the food programs are intercultural and/or intergenerational, they encourage opportunities for people of different backgrounds, cultures and ages to interact with each other. This also provides opportunities for people to challenge their underlying assumptions and stereotypes about cultures and learn to work with others different from themselves. One participant said that before taking the program “we had some not good feelings in our heart about each other ... what we saw on social media and other places made me feel afraid, but when we are working at the same station we go to know that people want to love each other. Before no connections we did not have ideas about others’ feelings, but when we work together, most of the people they love each other, want to work with other cultures and colours.”The respondents of the quantitative surveys participated in several different programs, and Table 2 indicates perceptions of how diverse the groups were.

Figure 1: Participation of Diverse Cultural Groups



Significance

Food is a great equalizer and a vehicle to bring all people together, because “everyone has to eat!” Throughout the interviews, participants made it clear that the by participating in food programs they pushed at the edges of their own assumptions about other people and cultures, and experienced mutual understanding and learning. It is a starting point for deeper appreciation of cultural differences and valuing of diversity. Once understanding and appreciation are established, acknowledging, sharing and celebrating many cultures seems to become a natural

occurrence. Intercultural spaces foster significant impact and learning; despite language barriers and varying skill levels, and with a little patience and perseverance, there is always something to learn from one another.

But cultural learning is not just about other cultures; many of our interviewees shared insights into the self-knowledge and paradigm shifts they made in themselves, related to cultural norms, gender roles and integrating new expectations for family members. In many instances the experience of sharing and exchange begins in the family unit, but it does not end there, nor does it remain static or unchanged.

Possible Responses

Intercultural learning had significant impacts on the participants, especially those who shared examples related to paradigm or behavior shifts. As such, we would like to see how we can amplify this aspect in our program. Some ideas include strategically embedding intercultural training within the program, introducing cultural ambassadors or peer mentors to support learning. We envision developing a program to recruit and train people with cultural and language competencies that could be matched with participants to support their engagement and learning.

We also noticed a difference between two of the food programs: participants in Food Skills for Families followed a specific curriculum, whereas, the Cooking Clubs tended to be driven by participants and their ideas. The latter provided opportunities that were more conducive to intercultural connections, and an idea to enhance the former was to add an extra session where games, like “Master Chef” would be introduced. We envisioned that participants would be placed in small teams and given ingredients, and would have to collaborate to come up with a menu. The fun (and possibly competitive) game could potentially create more opportunities for participants to interact with their peers from other cultures.

Forces at work

Group dynamics play a critical role in the food programs, and largely support the outcomes for participants. Many interviewees expressed that participating in the program was “like being in a team,” and reflected on the experiences—both positive and challenging.

Participants were passionate about teamwork and learning together, and overall spoke very positively about the experiences of cooking, learning and eating together. Some of the impacts participants shared were that they were more committed to their team, had learned to get along and work with others, and learned to identify how individuals’ strengths and skills as a way of enhancing their own and others’ experiences in the group. One participant who led a cooking class said: “although it took a lot longer and was annoying sometimes to get through the cooking

tasks with people who had little to no English, I learned a lot about the other people by cooking and sharing food.”

Learning to work in teams that are diverse is not without challenges. One interviewee who led a cooking class said: “Some people did not get along—they had to learn to get along, work together.” Participants stated that sometimes the groups were “frustrating to chaos” and that it was “important to understand different volunteer facilitators have different styles.” This specifically refers to volunteer-lead cooking clubs or food programs, and relates to leadership style – “some facilitators are stricter about rules, while others are not, so it is important to understand each other’s personality.”

Other examples that demonstrated group challenges included concerns with equity and access to food. In some cases, problem-solving was done as a group. “We ran out of food once so some participants did not eat, so the group decided to portion out the plates equitably.” In other examples, participants felt that not everyone did the same amount of work. As one participant said: “sometimes it’s difficult to get people to clean up...back to learning the group dynamic!” When asked how he overcame this challenge, he said “problem-solving the family way” and “communicating that we are not eating until the kitchen is clean.”

Personal resiliency was key to working through challenges with group dynamics, especially with the participants who had taken a leadership role in facilitating a cooking club or other hands-on cooking program. “Patience and negotiation with people...is important. They are not your family so you cannot get mad, need to keep composure. The challenge is getting results that you feel comfortable with.” Others said “it was important to give feedback” when group members were behaving in ways that did not support the group.

Some interviewees said that challenging group dynamics gave them an “opportunity to build confidence in working with groups” and other participants indicated that the practical hands-on interaction with others supported their people-skills learning.

“I like that everyone collaborates, it is together helping, and when it is prepared, we are all eager, to try it, taste it, and then we are satisfied.”

Significance

In planning for the cooking programs, staff have not typically considered the impact of group dynamics on participants’ experiences and learnings, yet this was a significant theme that emerged. The participants we interviewed had experiences in various cooking programs—some staff-led, and others volunteer-led, so there was some difference in how this challenge emerged. For example, one cooking program follows a specific funder-driven curriculum, while the second program provides some structure, but is largely driven by the volunteers and participants.

Our first learning edge is: How might we better support the staff and volunteer leaders to provide more consistency in the cooking programs, regardless of who is leading the groups. A second learning edge is to explore how we can potentially build upon our activities to enhance this outcome—perhaps by integrating more activities apart from the actual hands-on cooking and eating. Some ideas included embedding ice breaker activities at the outset, such as “speed dating,” that would enable people to get to know each other better before launching into the cooking program itself.

Possible Responses

Influencing how group dynamics play out in a program may be one of our biggest leverage points. There is an opportunity to systematically embed training about how groups function and how to facilitate diverse groups. As one of our goals is to support participants to lead and organize the cooking groups, we can improve participants’ feelings of success by providing supports to help them facilitate groups. Given that we already offer leadership programs in other divisions, we could explore what elements should be adapted and integrated in the cooking programs. But it is not just about participants – staff, too, have different facilitation experience and styles, and we see an opportunity to strengthen impacts for participants by strengthening the skills of our staff.

Out of the Corner and Into the Kitchen: Catalyzing Reciprocity

The spirit of reciprocity is ever present in the voices of our participants that engage in our food programs. They express a desire to give back to others almost immediately, to share skills and knowledge that are rich in personal stories, family recipes, traditions, celebration and much more.

Data from the interviews reveal that participants feel more capable, and willing to contribute to their community by volunteering. They experienced added benefits to their lives by getting involved in food programs, and showed eagerness in helping or supporting others— despite any lack of confidence they might have felt prior to joining the programs or coming to the Neighbourhood House. One participant said: “I will like to help people with difficulties... Maybe start a popular kitchen. I would like to help single moms.”

A participant who was very hesitant initially, said:

“It was like winning the lottery because I was afraid at first to enter MPNH. Many times I walked by and about two of those times I tried to come in and left and finally [I] talked to Shirley and she seemed friendly. I felt happy. Once I started [programs] I realized I was needed and could donate my time doing what I like.”

Through the interview process many participants revealed that they “shared” information with others, whether it was other participants, family members, or others outside of the Neighbourhood House, and through this process gained confidence. A participant stated that by “coming to this community I feel more free and strong. I spent lots of time in my home before. I thought then a lot about how to help others and now I am not so timid anymore. I am able to be myself. I was scared about this country, its people, but now, not anymore.” It is clear from these statements that although people may not express their experience as “reciprocity,” the exchange of knowledge, time, and experience is a natural state when people feel connected.

Another participant talked about getting out of her comfort zone in order to be of greater support in the community as her desire to support others and learn about her passion for food, culture and learning other traditions grew. This led to a greater understanding across cultures, age groups, and socio economic backgrounds. Overall participants experienced an increased sense of personal fulfillment and possibilities for the future, leading them to see themselves in more active roles in their community and supporting others. One interviewee said: “I am engaging more in the community already and got a community grant and never thought of doing this before.”

A key aspect of reciprocity and its impact on individuals is how participants move past their own preconceived barriers, such as language skills, level of education and personal characteristics in order to support others. An interviewee said: “Now I can go into the kitchen and be more active, now it’s more like ‘What can I do to help?’ while before I would have gone into a corner... it was so easy to ignore that side of me. The nudge to help and being encouraged to lead has helped me. I am now more engaged and I have two or three volunteer opportunities, and I am more aware of other community needs.”

Significance

Food programs at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House are catalysts for change. While participants may find themselves on the receiving end when they first join a cooking program as learners and participant, interviewees indicated growth in perspective and awareness about others and their own capacities. Their desire to give back is a way to establish and grow skills and confidence and to feel that they have the power to contribute. Reciprocity is not just about a simple exchange of services, skills, or knowledge, but is also a way of creating purpose and meaning. Reciprocity grows into an inner passion for the individual to contribute to overall community health, that no matter how little or how much you know or have, you can share it with others: “You can help your community, people and at the same time experience pleasure in giving.”

However, not all programs demonstrated the impact of reciprocity as strongly as others, and we asked ourselves why there were differences. Our analysis is that this outcome is implicit and, therefore, our next questions lead to how we could make the goal of reciprocity more explicit.

Possible Responses

To embed the opportunities for greater reciprocity we suggested weaving activities and learning moments that will get participants thinking about reciprocity throughout the program. Some of the ideas include intentionally setting up all food programs at the outset with an explicit goal that participants are expected to have ownership of the program, and to contribute back to sustain their own and others' learning. Activities might include 5 minute reflections at the end of each session, or embed time for groups to plan a menu they will create together. We have mentioned in the earlier section the possibility of offering additional training related to facilitation skills, and whether this is an additional add-on to the cooking classes, or as a separate program, we see this solution as also supporting participants to build the confidence and skills to reciprocate in ways that would benefit themselves and others in their group.

Pathways

Participants in our food programs indicated that the cooking programs provided pathways to many opportunities—to test new skills, try new things and establish community connections. Their comments demonstrated that they appreciated the chance to test new cooking skills, try new recipes and establish social connections. Whether it be a healthier life-style, a volunteer opportunity, a leadership role, or connecting to other new vocational opportunities, participants saw the food programs as catalysts that helped them to take the next step in their goals.

Exploring possibilities was a theme often repeated. One participant said: “In Canada we have opportunities. If you are not happy about things, you do something about it. You can write letters, you can collect money. There are many things you can do to do something good or to change something you don't like.” New possibilities led to new pathways.

Being in the program proved to be a confidence builder for many, and motivated participants to test out new skills. One immigrant man said after the cooking program, he joined the men's group at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, and led more cooking classes, including cooking turkey for the first time! His involvement in the program encouraged him to seek employment in the food security field, and he has begun by taking Food Safe Level 1 training: “While I was at training, I networked with trainers about job possibilities and they asked me to send them a resume.”

Leadership emerged as another pathway, and perspectives on how participants demonstrated leadership were multi-layered. Some participants demonstrated that they had led a cooking

group. Others—even if they had been in a group leadership role—minimized their own role, and attributed it more to the group. However, it was clear that participants felt the cooking programs enabled and encourage them to test leadership in different ways, including having the opportunity to practice leadership outside the home and work. Taking a leadership role in the cooking program helped participants gain the confidence to try a leadership outside of the program.

An immigrant woman with very primary English skills said leading two groups (one small, the second for 45–50 people) said “being responsible to show people about my food helped me to learn how to teach other people about cooking.” The experience with the cooking club helped her to get a few casual shifts in MPNH’s kitchen, where she learned to work in the kitchen on her own, which led to a volunteer job in a restaurant where she is learning to be on the food prep line. At the time of the interview, she believed this was an important volunteer role as she felt strongly that it would lead to employment. This outcome is clearly aligned with her passions; when asked to dream a bit about the future, she said “If we are dreaming, I’d like to own a restaurant.”

For other participants, seeing others from similar background (new immigrants) lead and engage others is a significant motivating force. An immigrant woman said “the program helps me by seeing other immigrants taking charge and sharing despite their language skills are not as good as mine. They take lead and share about their food.” She said “I am now more engaged and I have two to three volunteer opportunities, and I am more aware of other community-based organizations and businesses.”

Supporting others and providing leadership was rated high in the quantitative survey, with an average of 81% stating they had either sometimes or often helped with the following:

Table 2: Supporting others and providing leadership

Helped a small group complete a task	92%
Mentored and supported someone to learn skills	88%
Lead a class	68%
Helped organize a workshop or event	75%

Volunteering was a dominant theme. Food program participants wanted to give back, and saw volunteering as one way to benefit themselves and others. One woman said “being in this program gave me the confidence to go and volunteer at my son’s daycare center for their hot lunch program,” and young person said “It makes me want to volunteer more.”

By being part of the food programs, participants become aware of other resources available at the Neighbourhood House. In particular, several participants noted that they had either applied for or

lead a Neighbourhood Small grants project. For some participants, this was an aspiration to strive for: “next year I will apply for a neighbourhood small grant – and I will start thinking about doing something close to my kid’s school and neighbourhood.”

The quantitative survey results demonstrated that 69% of the respondents said that the experience of being in the program helped them to find a volunteer job, and 35% said it helped them to find a job.

Significance

For many of participants, the opportunities to be involved in cooking and food skills programs are limited by a number of barriers—from language, to economics, to low self-esteem. However, participants expressed the value of their engagement in the food programs in terms of building their confidence and creating pathways for other involvements, or experimentations, whether that be leading a small group or class or trying out a volunteer role at the Neighbourhood House.

What surprised us is that many of our participants did not see themselves as leaders or teachers in the formal sense, however, synchronized learning where both the facilitator and the participant equally share in the teaching as well as the learning proves to be a powerful and profound outcome. Through the interview process many participants revealed that they ‘shared’ information with others, sometimes other participants, sometimes family members, and through this process gained confidence. Most of the participants did not see themselves as teachers and as such this theme was not high. This is possibly because the Neighbourhood House has shied away from using the formal term “teacher” and have leaned more towards peer learning and mentorship. This approach is consistent with adult learning principles that puts the learner at the centre of their own learning. In creating a welcoming environment that fostered learning and experimentation, we helped individuals gain confidence to move into new roles and explore their skills as teachers, group leader and mentors. This outcome is a strong learning for us, and has given us food for thought as to how to better frame the food programs through the adult learning principles lens.

The outcomes of improved cooking skills and healthy eating turned out not to be the “main course” in our findings, and for participants was a secondary outcome. For our participants the biggest impact goes beyond health and nutrition to helping them to put into practice or develop Canadian soft skills related to personal development, access to later employment and confidence building. The end goal seems to lead participants to potential alternatives for connecting far beyond the kitchen, beyond the Neighbourhood House, and finding pathways to the greater community and become bridges to others if need be.

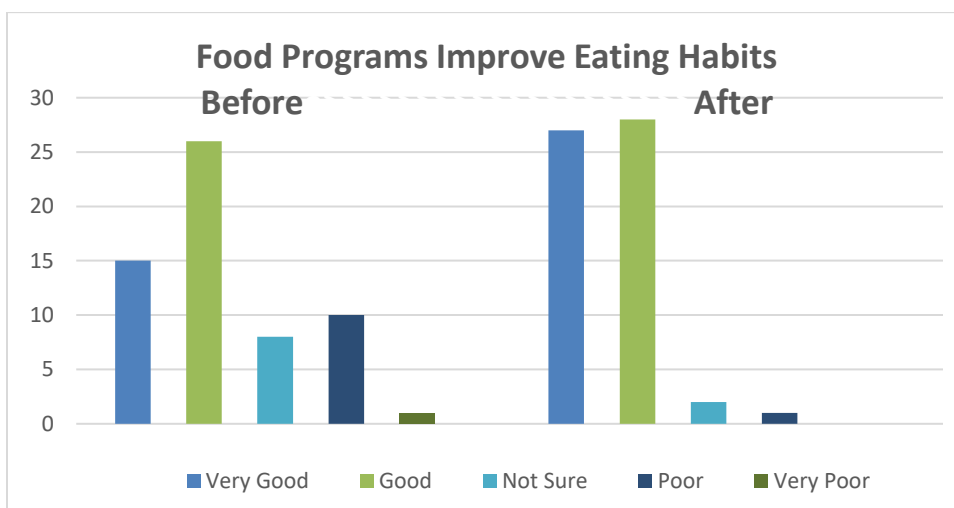
Possible Responses

There were many successful participants who demonstrated that food programs were stepping stones to other opportunities, and this outcome is interconnected to reciprocity, which we have suggested in the previous section, should be explicitly embedded in the program. We also see an opportunity to further strengthen our approach by more strategically training our staff and volunteer-leaders to understand and utilize adult learning principles as a way of amplifying the “teacher-learner” paradigm. We also felt that there was a real opportunity to establish a pilot program that encouraged networking and relationship building that went beyond the 6 to 8 week cooking program, and that encouraged opportunities for people to form social relationships beyond the cooking programs and the Neighbourhood House itself.

Not just about the food

One of the goals of the food programs is about skill building related to food, nutrition and food security. Our interview and survey results unequivocally demonstrated that this intended impact resonates with participants. One interviewee said “I would never have tried some of these [dairy and other food groups] if it wasn’t for the [program].” Another interviewee said “I have grown because I cook better...when you cook and it’s really good and healthy, you feel proud...” In the surveys, respondents indicated awareness that their eating habits improved after taking the program(s) by 27 percentage points (from 68% to 95%) in the good to very good range, and 17% in the Very Poor to Poor range (from 18% to 1%). The graph below demonstrates the perceived change in eating habits from before and after taking the program in participant responses.

Figure 2: Food Programs Improve Eating Habits



A more revealing impact, however, is that the food programs are “not just about the food.” They are also about creating social connections. Social connections are an important determinant of physical health and mental and emotional well-being. Bringing people together to cook and share food creates a sense of belonging and safety, and that the act of cooking together bonds people and helps form “tight knit groups” and relationships. One participant said: “we are like family...sharing good feelings with people, take not only food skills, we take good memories...”

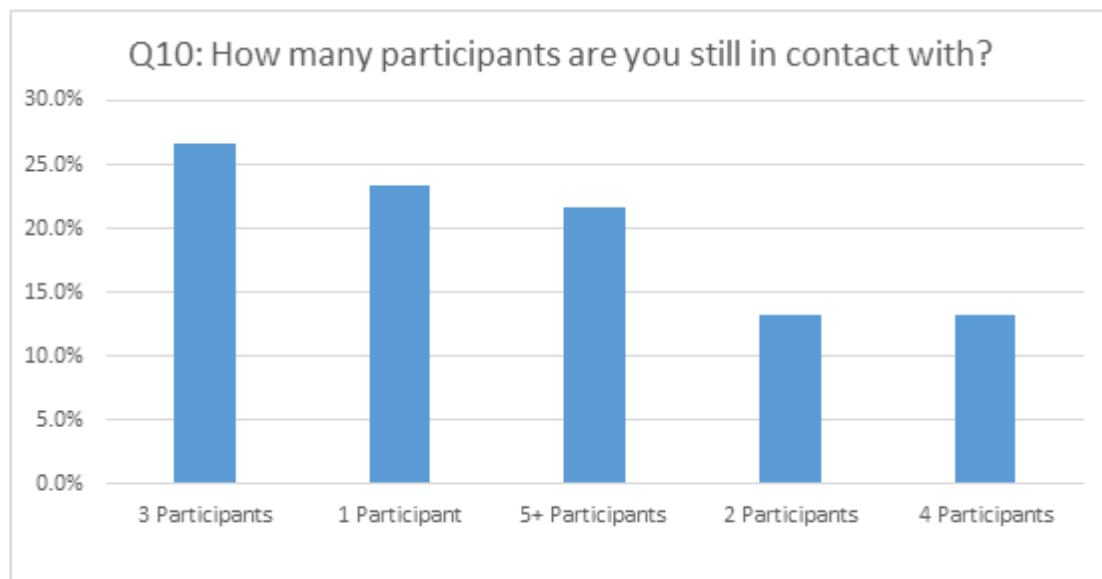
Several participants indicated valuing the connection with people from other cultures and being in an intergenerational environment which was like “being in a family.” A single immigrant man said: “I came here on my own and I needed to build a social network to help me. That’s how I was able to find a place to live.”

Many of our respondents, who were learning or improving their English skills, spoke about the program giving them time to build connections when language was a barrier. They said the Neighbourhood House was a safe place to test out new skills—both language and cooking skills. A newcomer replied: “When I came to MPNH, I did not talk to people a lot but I changed a lot” after being involved in two food programs. She was especially “proud that [she] learned how to read and make complicated recipes, especially baking!”

Some respondents indicated that they had met someone new, and formed relationships that went beyond the food programs: “We built friendships and we are all very close, thanks to the cooking class...We call each other, [and say] ‘Hey, let’s go out for dinner.’” Another participant indicated meeting another family from a different cultural background at the cooking club: “Our husbands work in similar jobs and our kids are the same age.”

Social connections were strongly correlated by the quantitative survey, with over 93% of respondents stating they either agreed or strongly agreed that they had made new friends and 85% stating they have a larger social network. Perhaps more revealing about the depth and quality of the relationships developed, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to the question about how their participation in a food program helped them “make new friend [they]can turn to for help.” Additionally, when asked to identify the number of people survey respondents were still in contact with after the program, all respondents indicated they were in contact with at least one other participant, and almost 22% said they were in contact with more than five other group participants.

Figure 3: Contact with participants of other cultures



Significance

Over 90% of our interviewees were newcomers to Canada and were feeling socially isolated. Others were new moms experiencing post-partum depression. And others had different reasons for not feeling like they belonged. Regardless of background or age, a common ingredient in most of the interviewees found ways to break through social isolation by finding ways to connect and build relationships with other people experiencing similar situations. Through their participation in the cooking programs, participants were able to find a home away from home, bonding with people across cultures and lifestyles creating an inclusive, welcoming place to connect and impact their sense of belonging to community.

Possible Responses

At Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, we work with many vulnerable populations, including families, newcomers and Aboriginal people, who benefit from broader social networks. We have long been extolling the virtues of cooking programs in connecting people and helping to build social networks to improve the health determinants, so this insight was not a great surprise; however, there is some indication that this goal could be strengthened.

We considered bringing back past participants as role models and guest speakers to share their experiences. Additionally, we felt that developing a cultural ambassador program—which we have referred to in a previous section—would also embed opportunities and provide new pathways for past participants. By training past participants with cultural and language knowledge to support new participants we would be embedding a systematic way to volunteer

and develop skills that could support participants with gaining stronger footholds in the community and in employment. We anticipate that this idea could also be embedded in other programs within the Neighbourhood House, in addition to the cooking programs. We envision a team approach to developing a cadre of cultural ambassadors that can be used across different programs to support the learning and integration of many participants in our different programs.

The Icing Under the Cake: Mental Health and Wellness

What is mental health and wellness, and what is the connection to our food programs? We found that mental health runs through the very flavour and work that we do in a way that is inseparable. Although this was not intentionally explored, it came through the essence of what participants shared during the research process. The mental health strategy of Canada clarifies that “mental health is different from the absence of mental illness, and is integral to our overall health” and provide the following definition:

“Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his own community” (Changing Directions, Changing Lives: the Mental Health Strategy for Canada, 2012, pg. 14).

The most common underlying causes challenging our participants’ mental health were their initial lack of social connections and supports, adequate learning environments and opportunity for personal development that integrate family and group dynamics. The impacts expressed by our interviewees reveal that their attachment to the program resulted in unplanned impacts that demonstrate more resilient mental health and wellness strategies.

Belonging

Several of our respondents spoke about experiencing depression or loneliness, which was a key motivating factor to join a group program. The newcomer participants expressed being isolated and lacking “the family network.” One immigrant woman expressed her experience of coming to Canada and the impact of being involved in the food programs: “In the beginning, it was a horrible life. I was mentally sick, but if we connect with others it is better...it helped me come out from negative thinking to the positive. If our thinking is positive...[it helps] us to have a positive attitude.”

Another immigrant woman disclosed at the outset that when they arrived in Canada, she “felt depressed” and was referred to Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House, which “was...*el punto de partida* (a point of departure) to try new things, to be more comfortable with people. It took me out of my depression, the loneliness I felt. Now I feel useful, I feel happy and I feel more connected.” Further into the interview, the same respondent indicated that her deeper

commitments were to be “more involved in the community so [she could] help other newcomers connect and get over depression.”

Many other participants said they had been referred by another immigrant experiencing similar feelings of displacement and isolation, and in turn, brought others to the program: “The friend I met who was here a year before me, who told me about the program, was very helpful. I brought another mom... You feel like you are home, you can ask questions, you don’t feel judged.”

Feeling Valued through Self-Discovery

Feeling good about ourselves and feeling empowered are key ingredients for good mental health and self-efficacy. Through their attachment to the program, and especially for those who followed pathways such as volunteering or leading a cooking class, participants demonstrated they found greater personal skills and more resilience that impacted their levels of confidence and self-worth. In almost all interviews, participants shared some aspect of personal growth that catalyzed new behaviours, experimentation or risk-taking that were expressed in terms of self-worth and improvement. One interviewee said “I have grown because I cook better...when you cook and it’s really good and healthy, you feel proud and you get the courage to try new things.” Another interviewee gave a powerful example of how he gained confidence and self-worth through the programs and gained the courage to bring leadership to his church community. He said: “I can gather people...and use my experience to lead them to show them how to have healthy food.”

Upward Shift in Confidence: The Secret Ingredient!

Trying new things, increasing knowledge and then having an opportunity to experiment and share with others were all highlighted through the data from the interviews. Interviewees spoke about building confidence as result of leading workshops, sharing with other participants, taking on new volunteer roles and expanding social networks. Much of the realizations that participants shared is deeply connected as well to their own realizing of the potential they have by putting into practice new skills, knowledge; this in turns increases participants’ confidence in their own agency and leadership, first, of their own life and, secondly, of the people they can support in the community/program.

One participant said: “Before I was not confident to talk to others.[I was] fearful...[it] gave me the change to know others.” Another participant, an immigrant woman, expressed that meeting others who had similar experiences and struggles as her (such as loneliness and integration) encouraged her to speak with new people. She said, “talking to [other participants] during meal prep and eating food helped me to be more confident. I am not in as bad a spot—I can help others.” Later in the interview, it was clear that she had expanded her reach and saw herself positively contributing to the community and that her increased confidence impacting her mental

health. She said “I’m excited to share my new-found tips and tricks in the kitchen with other moms I meet. It’s something that can bring us closer together ... I’m more involved in my kid’s school now. Last year we had a dinner for the school, we invited parents from different cultures and asked them to bring food from their culture. I helped in the organization and it was a success!”

Quantitative survey results indicate 95% of respondents felt more confident and over 86% indicated that they would likely share their new food knowledge and skills with others in the future.

Personal Development

Personal development relates to improving self-awareness and identity, managing emotions, and developing talents and potential. These personal skills help participants to build greater self-efficacy as well as resiliency, which all contribute to mental wellness.

Food programs at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House happen in both informal and formal environments. Programs can be run by either a volunteer who is designated as a leader, shared leadership among multiple volunteers, or led by a staff member. The nature of how these programs are offered creates an environment where individuals have extensive space and opportunity for personal development and growth. This came out as a strong and unexpected theme in the interview process.

The group dynamics, time spent in the program and the establishment of gender roles all became potential catalysts in the growth process. Additionally, individuals offered many insights into their self-discovery process.

One participant said the program has given him “energy” and before taking the program, he was “broken down.” He spoke about seeing doctors, and about how he tried to fix himself, but his “tiredness” was not going away. However, “the nutrition and yoga has helped” him a lot to reduce his tiredness. The program also helped him to do a lot of other things, like volunteering. All this helped him prepare for regular work. He said “I want to stay fit, I try new things, I continue to volunteer, exercising, I go out for the day.”

Many of the mothers interviewed expressed personal growth as becoming a better parent. One interviewee said “I was in a bit of a depression when I started the program. I felt very isolated and this was a breath of fresh air every week.” She also said that “it connected me to my health and my family’s health. I know if we eat better, we will be healthier and I want to live longer and be there in the future for my son.”

When discussing the theme of personal development we found that individuals were able to explore their leadership potential. This happened when people felt empowered to stretch these

skills and was facilitated by a positive group dynamic and environment. Further areas that were developed included acceptance. Acceptance of others and difference is essential to the work we do. This opens the door to understanding others strengths, dispelling stereotypes and in turn, empowering others to do the same. As this was not an intended area of focus for our food programs, this has not been a well-documented impact.

Significance

One of the best parts about taking a plunge into unknown waters, is not what you expect to find but what you didn't expect to find. What we expected to find is that participants would identify new skills and healthy eating habits, as well as discuss the impacts of social connection and leadership development. What was unexpected and only realized through the Project Impact evaluation process was that the food programs are having a significant and measurable positive impact on participants' mental health.

The findings have showed us that MPNH food programs do more than create an environment where people meet, discover new foods, laugh and rejoice and develop cooking skills. They begin an adventure of self-discovery, leading to a greater sense of confidence and a greater sense of feeling valued. These feelings transcend the kitchen and positively affect the participant's lives in many unintended and extraordinary ways. Evidence of the benefits of the food programs in increasing sense of belonging as well as developing capacity for self-value, confidence and personal development is pervasive in the research from both the quantitative and qualitative data. How the interviews laid out the connection of the food programs to positive mental health impacts was surprising and has given us new opportunities to explore.

Possible Responses

Mental health and wellness emerged as the meta-theme that encompasses almost all the other findings, and any responses we had could not be isolated from the other findings. However, we considered that by framing the food programs within the Population Health paradigm (Public Health Agency of Canada) we could consider the food programs within a greater cluster of activities that support participant's to increased improvements to other social determinants of health. While the project impact research has provided us with evidence that the food programs are already supporting some of these outcomes (in particular, Building Social Support Networks, Social Environments, Personal Health Practices and Coping Skills), the question we ask is: What more can we do in the program to increase these outcomes?

Recommendations and Steps Forward

The cooking programs already do many things that influence the positive impacts experienced by the participants are experiencing, and yet there are opportunities for improvement.

1) **Adjusting Program Objectives and Bolstering Participant Supports**

- a) Embedding opportunities for more outcomes related to reciprocity and leadership by explicitly stating these as program objectives and integrating training and participant supports to achieve the objectives.
- b) Embedding intercultural training and facilitator training for staff, food program volunteers and kitchen leaders to build skills in facilitating groups and managing group dynamics
- c) Integrating trained volunteers with different language capabilities to support participants with English language challenges.

2) **Establishing a Networking / Social Connections pilot program**

- a) Establishing opportunities for networking and relationship building that go beyond the six- to eight-week cooking programs.

3) **Develop a Cultural Ambassador / Peer Support Training Program**

- a) Recruit and train participants with cultural and language knowledge to support new participants to systematically develop skills and capacities to support pathways outcomes, but also to secure support and role modelling for new participants.
- b) Integrate training related to mental health and wellness, basic counselling and understanding cultural adaption models to train a cadre of culturally competent volunteers with basic counselling skills and knowledge to support new participants.

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Mount Pleasant Project Impact Interview Questions

Introduce yourself and your role in the House.

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House Food Programs are a very important part of what we do at MPNH. We offer many types of food programs and we are interested in learning how your participation in a hands-on cooking program has impacted people who have participated in them. I will be asking a series of questions related to your experience and learning in the food programs. There are several interviewers and we will be conducting about 24 interviews. We will be combining the information to look at what people say for similar experiences and learnings. Your responses will be completely confidential.

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Yes / No

I would like to record the interview to help me remember what you said as I go over my notes. Do you agree to me recording the interview? Yes / No

Can you start by telling me about how long you have been coming to MPNH? And what food programs you have participated in? I'm particularly interested in those where you had hands on cooking experience.

Other demographics: you may need to ask how long they have been in Canada, do they consider themselves a senior, etc. Otherwise, if it is not applicable please indicate M/F Age category:
youth adult senior

Know >>> Believe

- 1) What are some of the new approaches or new opportunities around nutrition you may have discovered through this program? → Have these new approaches changed your previously held beliefs around nutrition or eating?
- 2) In what ways did this program develop a new sense of understanding about your personal health and wellbeing? → What has this program changed your mind about?
- 3) In what ways did this program develop a sense of leadership in you? → How has this changed what you believe about yourself as a leader?
- 4) What is the biggest discovery about your Neighbourhood House you made in this

program? → How has this learning affected your perceptions of your community and your role in it

Do >>> Become

- 5) What skills that you acquired in this program have you tried out? → How are you applying these skills in other parts of your life
- 6) What was the most difficult part in participating in this program? → What had to change in you to enable you to be successful or keep going?
- 7) What part of the program gave you the greatest sense of growth and accomplishment? → How has this helped you to grow in other parts of your life?
- 8) What have you learned here that you find really difficult to apply consistently? → What in that is revealing about the things you want to work on in your life and the areas you want to develop in your life going forward?

Feel >>> Love

- 9) What - has been most exciting to you about being a part of the food program? → How has this made you more connected to the things you love?
- 10) What part of the program was the most frustrating to you? → When you felt frustrated or less excited, how did you stay committed and engaged to the MPNH community
- 11) How has the program inspired or motivated you? → How has this affected your passions?
- 12) In 5 years, if you keep growing as you have with the food program, what will your life look like? → Will this changed your commitment to the community?

Appendix 2: Quantitative Survey Questions

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House Food Programs

Quantitative Survey Questions

Please circle your answer

1 How do you identify yourself?

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Other – please specify _____

2 What is your age range?

- a. under 13
- b. 13 to 19
- c. 20 to 30
- d. 31 to 45
- e. 46 to 65
- f. 66 to 85
- g. Over 86

3 Are you Canadian born?

- a. Yes
- b. No

4 If not born in Canada, how many years have you lived in Canada?

- a. Less than a year
- b. 1 to 3 years
- c. 3 to 5 years
- d. 5 to 10 years
- e. Over 10 years

5 How long have you been involved at Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House?

- a. Less than 1 year
- b. 1 to 3 years
- c. 3 to 5 years
- d. 5 to 10 years
- e. Over 10 years

6 What food program or programs are or were you involved in?

- a. Food Skills for Families
- b. Cultural Cooking Club
- c. Community Kitchen
- d. Walk, Chop, and Shop
- e. Group cooking for events or program
- f. Other? (please identify) _____

Please place an "X" in the column

Very good Good Not Sure Poor Very Poor

7 How would you best describe your eating habits before this program?

8 How would you best describe your eating habits after taking this program?

Please circle your answer

9 As a result of this program, how many people did you meet from 'different' cultures than your own?

0 1 2 3 4 5 or more

11 As a result of this program, how many participants are you still in contact with?

0 1 2 3 4 5 or more

Almost Always Sometimes Once in a While Rarely Never

12 In this program I feel my diversity was/is celebrated

13 In this program I feel my ideas are being heard

14 Have you been able to share your personal /cultural experiences while attending the program

15 As a result of the program I felt safe and comfortable with the people I connected to

16 As a result of this program, how often are you likely to turn to or reach out to someone from the program for connection outside of the program?

17

Please rank the following statements about how food programs have helped you in your daily life

Strongly Agree Agree Not Sure Disagree Strongly Disagree

- a. Learned healthy ways of eating and how to avoid sickness or poor health
- b. Learned to cook new foods and new recipes
- c. Learned to read recipes
- d. Learned math skills related to measuring
- e. Learned how to convert recipes for larger servings
- e. Better communications skills
- f. Improved speaking, understanding and reading English
- g. Learned how to work with others
- h. Gained more confidence
- i. Ability to make and keep friends more easily
- j. Learned new ways of helping your children
- k. Gained new skills that will help you to obtain volunteer or paid work
- l. Other: (please specify) _____

18

Please rank the following statements about how your involvement in the food program has helped you become a part of your community

Strongly Agree Agree Not Sure Disagree Strongly Disagree

- a. Made new friends that you feel you can turn to for help

- b. You have learned to talk with others from different cultural backgrounds
- c. You have learned about, or feel better able, to feel safe and connected in your community
- d. You feel you have learned to build personal relationships in your community
- e. Demonstrated leadership in program
- f. Demonstrated leadership outside of program as a result of my experience

19

Please rank the following statements about how you demonstrated leadership skills in the program

Strongly Agree Agree Not Sure Disagree Strongly Disagree

- a. I helped a small group complete their cooking task
- b. I mentored and supported someone with less skills to learn
- c. I offered to lead a cooking class
- d. I helped organize a workshop or event
- e. Other (please specify): _____

20. Please rank the following statements about how your food program experience has helped you to take leadership in other areas of your life

Strongly Agree Agree Not Sure Disagree Strongly Disagree

- a. I feel more confident

- b. I made new friends
- c. I have a larger social network
- d. It helped me form better relationships with my family and friends
- e. It helped me find a volunteer job
- f. It helped me find a paid job
- g. Other (please specify): _____

Likely

Not Sure

Not Likely

21. How likely is it that you would share your new food knowledge and skills with other?

Contact Information

Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood House is a part of the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of BC. We would like to acknowledge the many funders and sponsors who contribute to our food programs, and to the United Way of the Lower Mainland and Dr. Steve Patty (Dialogues in Action) for the amazing learning experience.

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