

Kickstart Your Health issues vegan challenge



[Patti Singer](#), @PattiSingerRoc 9:27 a.m. EDT April 22, 2016



(Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Kickstart Your Health Rochester promotes a vegan diet for 21 days.**
- **Proponents say a plant-based diet can help reverse some chronic diseases.**
- **Critics are concerned the program is unrealistic for poor people who lack access to healthy food.**

Your challenge, Rochester — should you choose to accept it — is for three weeks to load up your plates with fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

From May 1 -21 during Kickstart Your Health Rochester, you'd forego the empty calories and pledge to eat only unprocessed, whole foods.

In some parts of the city, that could be mission impossible.

Rochester is the [fifth poorest among the nation's 75 largest metro areas](#), and the various health organizations have noted a [lack of access to fresh produce](#) — either because corner stores don't carry it or residents can't get to full-service supermarkets.

“It seems a shame to think we can't eat healthy or that we have to eat junk food because there is nothing else available to us,” said Dr. Ted Barnett, who with his wife coordinates the Rochester Area Vegan Society.

Barnett also is a member of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, which is spending about \$30,000 on Kickstart Your Health Rochester. The national nonprofit promotes a vegan diet as part of its mission into research and disease prevention. It runs Kickstart each month online, and this is the second time it has brought the free program to a city.

“Honestly, we're trying to change the culture of the community,” said Barnett. “And it's huge job. There are places in the community where this is not going to seem particularly realistic. And that's a terrible problem.”



Jahmir Douglas, 16, is named Power Plate Superhero by registered dietitian Maggie Neola as boys and girls make healthy snacks at the David F. Gantt Recreation Center. This is part of an initiative by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine to get people in Rochester to try a vegan diet for 21 days. (Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Kickstart is advertised on billboards in four neighborhoods surrounding downtown. The Physicians Committee has begun contacting health centers that serve low-income people. But most of the Kickstart activities in May are being held outside the city, including tours of the Wegmans in Pittsford Plaza and cooking classes at the New York Wine and Culinary Center in Canandaigua. The Rochester Area Vegan Society has scheduled an event from 10 a.m. to noon May 7 at the Rochester Public Market.

Barnett said the free program is for anyone, and modifications can be made. Participants register at kickstartyourhealthrochester.org, which posts information such as recipes and suggested shopping lists.



Dr. Ted Barnett is helping to organize and promote Kickstart Your Health Rochester. (Photo: Provided)

Physicians Committee approached Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren, who issued a proclamation of support.

“I thought it was great to talk about the health challenges that face our community,” Warren said.

She said the city has worked with neighborhoods and with organizations such as Foodlink to make nutritious food more common and more affordable. She said the timing of Kickstart could inspire residents to start their own or join community gardens, or become more active.

“I think we typically look at the glass as half empty instead of the glass as half full,” said Warren, who committed to making some lifestyle changes during the 21 days.

“Instead of looking at what’s wrong with it, let’s look at what’s right with it. We have not only the mayor but many people in the community promoting and asking our community to think about their health.”

Enabling, not helping



Registered dietitian Maggie Neola shows boys and girls a chart with four groups of foods before teaching them how to make healthy snacks at the David F. Gantt Recreation Center. (Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Barnett cited reports that two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, and chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes overburden minorities. Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine advocates for research into the role of a plant-based diet in reversing chronic disease.

“In some ways, modern medicine acts as enablers,” said Barnett, an interventional radiologist. He performs angioplasty and stent procedures in arteries outside the heart.

"We have people who think they can mistreat their bodies and someone will come along and bail them out," he said. "To some extent, that's true. We treat their symptoms. And then they think they don't have to straighten out their life."



Before the Kickstart program came to Rochester, New Bethel CME Church on Scio Street had hosted Barnett at some of their health events. Based on what she heard, Patricia Rector-Hollomon started a more plant-based diet about a year ago and has kept off 52 pounds.

Rector-Hollomon lives in the Dewey Avenue area and is a nurse who leads the church's health ministry. She said nearly three dozen congregants plan to sign up for Kickstart Your Health Rochester and go through the three weeks together. She said people need to be encouraged to eat nutritious food. She expressed concern about how the program is being presented, and whether the message will reach African-American and Hispanic populations that are affected by chronic disease and those individuals will have the support to make changes.

Billboards promoting Kickstart are at Mt. Hope Avenue and Ford Street, Broad Street near Plymouth Avenue, North Winton Road near University Avenue and Pitkin Street near Richmond Street.

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine supplied the ZIP codes of the 93 people enrolled in the challenge as of April 21. Of those participants, fewer than 25 percent are from city ZIP codes that include areas of high poverty.

[The Monroe County Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan for 2014-2017](#) reported that 14 percent of county residents live in poverty. That figure is 30 percent in the city.

“Just putting billboards up and saying this is a plant-based diet is not going to do it,” Rector-Hollomon said. “... People may look at it and say, ‘One more thing. Unh-unh. And they're talking about no meat.’”

She also said while the idea is noble, the reality may be out of reach for many people.

“I teach in the City School District,” she said. “I see poverty first hand. I see people hungry. I tell people, ‘You may want people to buy canola oil. But if you’re getting food stamps and just surviving, you’ll buy lard for \$1.49.’”

Rector-Hollomon said she hoped the online program would provide more education and recognize cultural differences.

“Too many people come into our community and they stick something up and they expect for the people to get it,” she said.

‘We’ve seen this before’



Raisins used as boys and girls made healthy snacks at the David F. Gantt Recreation Center. (Photo: CARLOS ORTIZ/@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Kickstart Your Health Rochester grew from Barnett’s relationship with PCRM founder Dr. Neal Barnard, who recently gave a talk at New Bethel. Rector-Hollomon said Barnard gave practical advice about how people could participate in the program. She said that because of the health ministry, New Bethel congregants may already be more prepared than the general public.

Nancy Adams, executive director of the Monroe County Medical Society, said not every program has to appeal to every demographic.

Barnett is a member of the medical society, which Adams said is promoting the program because some people may benefit.

At the same time, she said, “We’ve seen this before. We’ve seen people (with) great ideas, good effort, doing the right thing, but it will not be easy for every socioeconomic group to embrace what they’re educating about.”

One example is the 5-2-1-0 Be a Healthy Hero campaign developed in 2007 by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. The program launched to great fanfare and high hopes of increasing the number of Monroe County children at a healthy weight.

The program did not meet expectations, said GRHF president and chief executive officer John Urban. He said many people knew about 5-2-1-0, but that didn’t mean children were eating five servings of fruits and vegetables, limiting screen time, being physically active and avoiding sugary drinks.

“The barriers are much more than knowledge,” Urban said. “What we have taken away, and what I think a lot of people have taken away who work in this arena, is while education is critical, it alone does not change behavior. There has to be much more active engagement with somebody whose behavior is trying to change.”

Urban said there are other potential pitfalls to programs superimposed on a community rather than created by that community. Those include a one-size-fits-all tendency, not factoring in barriers such as cost or access, and the perception people have of being nagged.

“I do think, not just for that part of the community, but for all of us, people do get a little bit tired of being told what’s right for them. In multiple dimensions, not just this,” Urban said.

A spokeswoman for Physicians Committee said success will be measured by the number of people who sign up for the program.

Convincing the kids



As part of its outreach, PCRM registered dietitian Maggie Neola went to some city recreation centers to teach kids how to make healthy snacks.

“When you start with kids, they get to learn how to make choices from a really young age and they get to discover these foods really taste great,” Neola said.

That was mostly the case during sessions at the David F. Gantt Center on North Street.

John Rios, 12, declared he didn’t like sweet peppers, but Neola gave him credit for trying and encouraged him to try again because it can take a few times to get used to something new.

Keris Duboise, 11, made a banana pop, dipping the fruit into soy yogurt and then rolling it in granola.

“It was my first time trying it,” she said. “I like it. I thought it tasted sweet and healthy at the same time. I liked the grains inside of it.”

Duboise said she liked playing with the food and trying new combinations. Given the choice, she said she’d try them again. Asked whether she has requests for the person who does the shopping in her house, she said, “I’d ask if I could get the yogurt and the bananas. And the granola.”

PSINGER@Gannett.com

Kickstart Your Health Rochester

For information about the free program, go to kickstartyourhealthrochester.org