

York Region Food Council, Food Network aim to dig deep into vital issue this fall



By Brock Weir

Food advocates in York Region have spent the last 35 years looking for 'quick wins' when it comes to food insecurity, and now they are looking to 'dig deeper.'

So says Joan Stonehocker, Executive Director of the York Region Food Network.

On Thursday, the York Region Food Network (YRFN) invited the community to its Industrial Parkway South facility, a complex which includes a teaching kitchen and a community garden, to have fun while learning the ins and outs of where their food comes from.

As they got their fingertips red mixing soil and seeds with modelling clay to make 'garden bombs' or getting down and dirty with handfuls of worms in a lesson about vermiculture, there was a more serious message just under the surface.

'We're trying to let kids know that healthy food is fun and delicious,' said Ms. Stonehocker. 'It's the whole story around food, how good it is for you and how good it is when you grow it well in the environment. It is also good for our local economy.'

While the summer is often a downtime for many community organizations, that is not the case for the YRFN. People have spent the summer fanned out into their various community gardens in Aurora, Newmarket and Vaughan, taking part in cooking and other varieties of food programs, and this momentum is set to continue through the fall.

'The fall ramps up even more because it is harvest season,' says Ms. Stonehocker. 'We have continuous workshops and later on this fall we have our annual Food for Change event. This year, it is called 'Finding Common Ground' and we're looking at the things around food that brings us all together. Food connects us all anyway, but what are those other common pieces and how do we build the community interest in ensuring we have healthy and sustainable food for everyone?'

For the YRFN, this is an age-old question, and it is a question they have tried to tackle in myriad ways.

In the first half of September, they aim to form the York Region Food Council, which Ms. Stonehocker says is an 'opportunity to bring interested organizations, individuals and governments all together to talk about the various aspects of food.'

These can range from nutrition programs and what they need to do to get these out there into the wider community; to agriculture and highlighting the importance of local farms and ensuring farmers are able to make a good living; to the broader issue of food security within York Region.

'We have been in touch with people like the new food section at the Mall and we're going to get in touch with Niagara College at the Armoury, we'll be working with the York Federation of Agriculture and we'll have lots of organizations come together to talk about food insecurity because we know they are finding more and more need for food in our communities,' she says. 'That is not the way we want to be moving.'

'We have spent 35 years on our quick wins and we need to dig a little deeper and talk about the cause of food insecurity, which is poverty. It is not getting better and I think the inequality in our society is making it even more dire for people who aren't able to work full time or for various reasons can't get a job. There are lots of people who are on social assistance who are still getting amounts of money to ensure they still stay in deep poverty. We need to look after those immediate needs, but we need to take the

next step on that.?