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Chef, cookbook author and founder of "Common Threads"

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The Power of Food

On June 4, I was fortunate enough to be among the hundreds of chefs who visited the White House South Lawn, eagerly supporting First Lady Michelle Obama's launch of the "Chefs *Move* to Schools" program. This new initiative calls on America's premier chefs to join the First Lady's "*Let's Move!*" campaign by adopting local schools and giving nutrition advice and cooking tips to school officials, parents and kids.

The visit was particularly gratifying for me, as forging connections between chefs, schoolchildren and the foods that surround them has been my mission for the past seven years. The Common Threads program -- which I started in Chicago in 2003 with my life partner Jesus Salgueiro -- was originally an avenue to provide underprivileged youth with the magic that accompanies tasting new, fresh foods and the satisfaction and confidence that comes along with preparing your own meals and learning new skills.

These are rewarding experiences I was fortunate to grow up with. But it wasn't until the aftermath of 9/11 that I was reawakened to the wonderful bonds that foods - even the most basic ones - can create. I traveled to Ground Zero with admittedly little to offer to exhausted rescue workers. But the homemade cookies we did share with them seemed to bring a little comfort, or at the very least, a smile.

It would be tough to imagine a clearer illustration of the power of food.

Our goal when we started Common Threads was, simply put, to bring this experience to children in low-income situations, often living in the "food deserts" that the First Lady has brought to the forefront of our national nutrition conversation. By partnering with public schools and exposing children to new foods from different cultures, we gave them a unique experience in a safe after-school setting. By making meals together, they gained basic cooking skills which they then shared with their friends and families. But it would have been difficult to foresee just how deep the nutrition crisis ran and how intertwined it was with so many of the other problems today's generation of young people faces.

Children living with hunger have lower math scores and are more likely to have to repeat a grade. Those deficient in essential nutrients are more likely to be hyperactive, absent and tardy, and have academic difficulties, including behavioral and attention problems. And, paradoxically, our undernourished children are overweight. Obesity and under-nutrition are linked problems, ones that disproportionately impact low-income and minority children and families.

The depth and urgency of the situation shows just how necessary the "Chefs *Move* to Schools" program is. And the success we've had through Common Threads has me thrilled at the potential of using chefs and cooking skills as a valuable and effective tool in the fight against child obesity.

Our most recent program evaluation found that 94 percent of Common Threads student participants now make healthier lunch choices and 60 percent have started helping their parents with grocery shopping. These kinds of improvements, made in just the span of a 12- week program, are what lend credence to Michelle Obama's goals for "*Let's Move*" -- they are lofty, but achievable. Surely it's possible to take the successes we've had in just Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles and Washington DC, and bring them to cities across the country with the help of the nation's best chefs.

What have we learned as our program has evolved? First and foremost, we can't sell our kids short. They're open to trying new foods and hungry to tackle new skills.

We've learned how critical it is to make real food the norm again; our bodies were never meant to eat processed foods that can sit for weeks on the shelf at the local gas station. I'm sure you joined me as my heart sank upon seeing the students in Huntington, W.Va., who couldn't identify a tomato on "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution." But if you don't live near a farm or have access to a supermarket, produce isn't on your radar, especially in elementary school. By taking the extra effort to make sure that kids just encounter real foods, we're halfway to getting them to eat some.

As "*Let's Move!*" correctly recognizes, it's critical to bring parents and community members on board and build coalitions. Our comprehensive parent outreach initiative through Common Threads includes parent meetings with nutrition education and healthy cooking demonstrations, kid-friendly cookbooks, and pantry starter-kits for all participant families. We've had some parents go on to become chefs themselves and volunteer with us! Parents and family members have shared how liberating it is to be able to take charge of their food choices, no longer relying on processed, packaged foods and no longer intimidated by the preparation involved in home-cooked recipes.

Few things are more empowering for children than learning skills that have lifelong value. And we see the effects beyond even cooking -- through the classes, they work together, appreciate new cultures, and share a meal. Taken together, we're increasing appreciation for quality foods, reversing the trend of generations of non-cookers, and celebrating our cultural differences and the things people all over the world have in common.

Art Smith is an award-winning chef and owner of restaurants such as Art and Soul in Washington, DC, and Table Fifty-Two in Chicago. He was Oprah Winfrey's personal chef for more than a decade. His personal journey losing 100 pounds shows it's never too late to get healthy.