

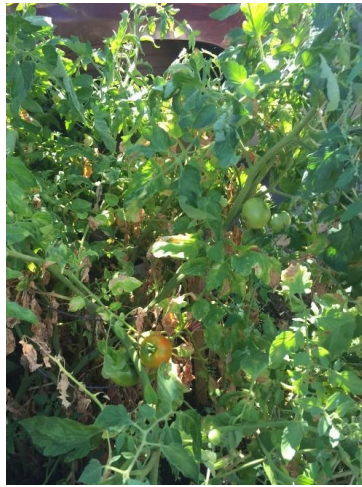
Mission for Nutrition  
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2017 BLUM Summer Field Internship  
San Ysidro Cohort

While prepping banh cuon in my car for the potluck with the promotoras, tearing the stretchy rice sheets and separating the vegetables, I worried that nobody would like it. The taste would be too strong, that it wouldn't be considered healthy enough, or it simply was just too foreign. I was terrified that the culture I was trying to understand and partner with would be offended by my assertion of my culture. Placing the meal down on the orange table cloth and lifting that styrofoam lid, my voice was tinged with anxiety as I explained how to prepare and eat the dish. As the promotoras began asking more questions and beaming appreciatively, that anxiety faded into warmth and pride. It's very much true that food is culture, so when the promotoras asked about my dish, they weren't just asking about the food but also about me. They were probing for a sense of my culture and that openness melted all my previous trepidations. From that moment, I realized that I wanted to support their efforts to reclaim their culture, to reclaim food as something more than just sustenance, to reclaim community health and sustainability.

A promotora is a community member who is specially trained to provide basic health education in the community without being a professional health care worker. Often promotoras are community elected residents who work for community-based health promotion projects. Thus, promotoras serve as liaisons between their community, and other health professionals, human and social service organizations. As liaisons, they play a variety of roles not limited to being a health advocate. As I learned through the internship, they are also mothers, friends, translators, helpful neighbors, teachers, marketers, and community experts. Promotoras are extremely effective in promoting physical activity and have the capacity to make meaningful change in the community's health. In fact, the San Diego Prevention Research Center team conducted research where they assessed the promotoras' impact on the community in several intervention based classes—and they too reached the same conclusion. Why? Maybe it is because communities that are repeatedly marginalized and very tight knit tend to respond better to community member leaders, rather than outside leadership pushing it way inside. Maybe it's because these promotoras are our mothers, our friends, our neighbors and there is already an inherent trust. A couple things are for certain though. The San Ysidro community would not be what it is without these women, and the internship would have hit a dead end without the knowledge and savvy of the promotoras.

On July 12<sup>th</sup> we sat down for lunch with the community promotoras while they talked a bit about who they were and what their goals were in the community. When we sat to eat, Ana Chiquete, a promotora, sat next to me and although I could not speak Spanish, we still tried to have a conversation. In my introduction, I had expressed interest in their nutrition initiatives, so she told me about her little garden with tomatoes, onions, and guava; she even had a mango tree. Other homes in the area have also invested in fruit trees and little produce gardens, however these are few and far between.

When walking around the area, one can observe that although several homes have space available for gardening—it is often not pursued.



When asking community members why, the first explanation that comes to mind is the cost of water. In addition to water wise irrigation systems being out of reach, maintaining a garden is time intensive—especially when plants are out of season, or planted in infertile sandy soils, or even when the wrong plants are selected for the environment.

Almost two weeks later, we met with the Resident Leadership Academy class, an initiative started by Community Health Improvement Partners and taught by Casa Familiar in San Ysidro to enable community leaders in low income areas to teach and inspire other community members to become leaders to make a healthier community. They expressed a general passion in implementing a garden in every home for the purpose of increasing access to fresh, organic produce. So far, they've been looking to other community members with accomplished gardens for guidance. To support their initiatives, our Blum interns are working to facilitate a relationship between Wild Willow Farms and Education Center and the Promotoras. Wild Willow is a farm where land is cultivated for the use of educating other on sustainability and nutrition. On August 9<sup>th</sup> we planned to meet the promotoras at wild willow to conduct a workshop on seasonal gardening and compost, and on August 16<sup>th</sup> to introduce the concept of container gardening as an easy and convenient outlet for urban gardening.

However, widespread community enthusiasm for home gardening is difficult to cultivate without first laying down a foundation of nutritional knowledge and whipping up excitement for healthy eating through fun and tasty recipes. Already the promotoras have implemented Zumba classes, which are increasingly popular with women and families, what with its vibrant popping music, as a fun way to stay active and decrease chances of cardiovascular disease. Yet exercise is not enough, they say. They want to establish a sort of health center where people can get their blood

sugar, blood pressure, or even their body mass, water weight, and fat percentage indexed. Already, they've participated in workshops led by Kelsey Hammington to learn about nutrition labels and the effects unhealthy food can have on the body. Soon the promotoras will collaborate with a new advisor from County Health and Human Resources, and hopefully piggy-back on a new program called "Sweet Victory" in which people who are pre-diabetic partner with lifestyle coaches to slow the onset of Type II Diabetes. They want to expand upon this to include a more general sponsor program where people partner up to help support each other's health and fitness goals.

Despite having a lot of enthusiasm and knowledge, no classes are yet offered to the community because there still isn't much structure to their ideas given their busy schedules and large workload. Hoping to be of some help, on July 26<sup>th</sup> I met with the promotoras to offer and discuss a possible structure for their "Mission to Nutrition" outlined below:

1. Emphasize that nutrition is important. Provide knowledge on how to eat healthy, how different foods affect our bodies. Do this through **nutrition classes**.
2. Now apply knowledge of nutrition and health to fun and easy recipes that the whole family can do. Do this through **cooking classes**.
3. When people understand how to cook and use fresh produce, they see how food is made. Now they want to grow vegetables in a sustainable way, to get them fresher and more accessible. Do this through **gardening and sustainability classes**.

We discussed possible items to put on the nutrition curriculum, which I would research and compile fact sheets from several sources, including their own knowledge. The women were particularly interested what foods to eat if you need to supplement your specific vitamins and minerals, what proteins are the healthiest, and how the metabolism works, or rather how to make it work in our favor. We planned to have two to three workshops in which we would learn about each topic and collaborate in turning it into text for a specific curriculum.



Then I demonstrated the three stage approach with making Vietnamese Spring Rolls. The first stage included me explaining the medicinal and nutritional value of each of the mints, some of

which were uniquely Vietnamese and thus foreign to the promotoras. Trinidad Herrera, leader of the RLA group and passionate about nutrition and sustainability, expressed great interest in the mints. She was anemic and interested in the high iron in mints, “How do you eat it? Can you make tea out of it?” she asked.

The second stage was me doing exactly that; I demonstrated how to use the mints in a fresh dish. The women appreciated the freshness of the vegetables and the simplicity of the dish--Trinidad actually even asked me for the recipe of the sauce. In fact she was the first person to try and make the rolls herself after the demonstration.

The third stage was simply showing how the meal can also be sustainable. The left-over mint stems could be recycled if they were to be put into water and then replanted. This method reuses produce in the kitchen as well as expedites the process towards growing produce.

Ultimately, the women seemed very excited to be working together, as am I.

The next week prior to the first discussion on the 7th, I met with Trinidad Herrera, a promotora that is especially passionate about nutrition, to ask her what topics she was interested in learning more about, or putting down on paper. She said that she was particularly interested in the nutrient values of foods as well as how to make your metabolism work for you. Trini also stated that it would be useful to review how to read nutrition labels to know how to compare nutrition facts, what nutrients are good or bad, and what everything means. I decided to help out and make a reference sheet for the promotoras to use and reproduce when they begin to implement classes.

I structured this reference sheet by nutrient--listing the beneficial properties of the nutrient and then what foods are good sources of that nutrient.

For example:

**Calcium**

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I continued this for a variety of nutrients: Potassium, Magnesium, Iron, Omega-3, Vitamin A, Vitamin E, Vitamin D, Vitamin C, Protein. When I met with the Promotoras on the 7th, we reviewed the fact sheet in addition to correcting, adding, and tweaking it until it became truly a group effort. The RLA graduates wanted to see more replacements for white sugar. Maria Cervantes was also interested in sugar alternatives, but especially in relation to people with diabetes or high cholesterol. Elsa Escalante was more interested in what kinds of proteins were healthier and what supplements were the best for the body. I noticed that I had left out Fiber, another essential nutrient. Eventually it became something that was representative of all of the voices and unique interests of the community. Afterwards, the women seemed very excited to discuss metabolism the following week. They came up to me and thanked me for the well organized discussion. Equally excited, I couldn't resist but share a video of my mother giving a tour of her little garden. Huddled around my phone with the other promotoras, listening to my mother speak about her plants with a smile in her voice, I couldn't help but smile myself, and feel a grateful warmth to be surrounded by such devoted and inspiring women.



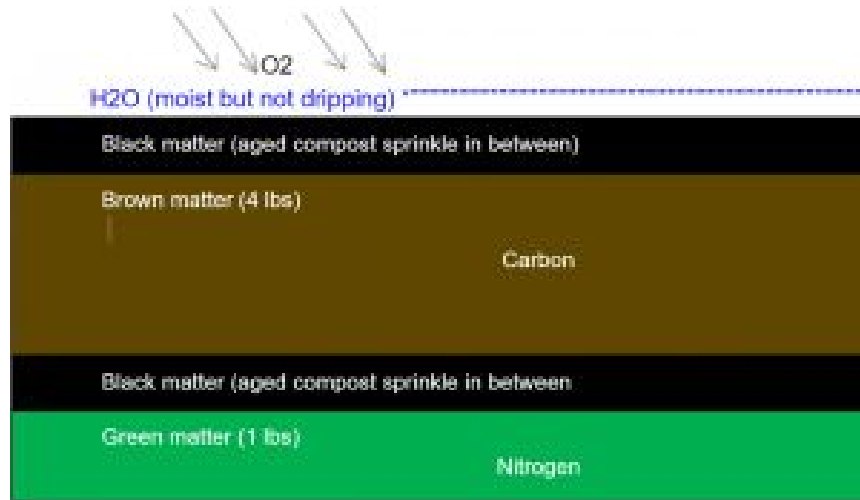
The Wednesday immediately following our meeting, we met again with the promotoras. This time we met in front of a blue-green van, waiting to be taken to Wild Willow Farm and Education Center to learn about compost. Marya Nash, a tall lady in denim, introduced us to the history of the farm. In 2002 a group of friends raised 8 million dollars to buy a farm that could be used as an education center, however it was too little too late. In an effort to start a conversation about the necessity of sustainability and education, they began a non-profit organization called the San Diego Sustainable Food Project. They searched for a plot of land to begin their education center, and finally in 2010, they started plowing and farming Wild Willow. In 2012, they began their Farm School, training 80-100 students a year and bringing over 3,000 school children to interact with the process of growing food. She also stated that this little six

acre parcel of land is the last part of San Diego that is not owned by urban development. Marya emphasized the importance of planting native plants that won't threaten the ecosystem. She added that diversity is also important, however it could be addressed through compost.



We used this point to transition into the composting workshop. Damiana Calvario led the workshop, starting with a discussion about what the promotoras already knew about composting. Most women already knew that compost is made out of produce, or leftover foods, but most of them believed that the produce had to be organic to make a healthy compost. Damiana quickly dispelled this, explaining that anything natural could be put in compost—but that it is a process with a specific formula.

The women quickly whipped out notepads and pens, and looked up, ready for action. Damiana continued. There were three ingredients to a static compost pile, with a fourth optional one. The first is green matter, like vegetables and eggshells and newspaper and literally anything else natural and non-processed. No bones or greasy/saucy foods like cheese, because they take too long to decompose and can attract animals. This green matter provides the nitrogen source for the compost. She also mentioned that natural yogurt can help with the decomposition because of the bacteria in yogurt. The second ingredient is brown matter like branches, or cut grass, or wilted flowers or weeds or hay. These dead materials add the carbon source to the compost. “The more crushed the material, the quicker it will decompose,” Damiana added. Finally the third essential ingredient is enough water to ensure that the material is moist, but not dripping. She also explains that an optional ingredient is already aged compost, or black matter, to help speed up the process. Damiana also related the compost pile to a lasagna with lots of layers. She stated that for every pound of green matter, there needs to be four pounds of brown matter, with the aged compost sprinkled in between. Layers can always be added on top, with mixing every once in a while to give everything oxygen. Below is an example structure of the compost:



Damiana also offered other compost structures. Vermicomposting uses worms to expedite the decomposition process, and a plus—it doesn't smell! And since worms can eat a lot, the formula can be less rigid, with less brown matter and more green. However, containers have to be dark with holes for breathing, and holes for draining water out of the bottom.



After a refreshing snack of hand picked grapes, the lesson part of the workshop ended and we followed Damiana and Marya to experience Wild Willow's farm and compost for ourselves.

To the left is an example of a vermicompost. The fruits and vegetables are in varying stage of decomposition. Scrape away the surface layer of dirt, and one can see little red worms wriggling from the sunlight. Damiana offered a hand of compost for the promotoras to smell. The dirt didn't smell dusty like much of the dirt in San Ysidro, but rather had a rich and nutty

undertone.





Since only a few promotoras could enter the compost tent at the same time, outside, Marya was introducing some of the native plants that they grew and their medicinal qualities.



A few of the promotoras recognized the first plant. “Feverfew” was a plant whose leaves, when boiled into a tea, are great for fending off headaches and fevers, along with achiness and pain. The promotoras collected seeds to start their own plants. The next plant that the promotoras asked about had fluffy orange flowers. “Lion’s Tail” or “Cola de Leon” as the promotoras called it, has flowers and leaves that when boiled in a tea, are especially good for women’s health and heart function. Marya recanted that although healthy, the tea was very bitter! which coaxed smiles from the women.

Ultimately, we meandered over to the steaming piles of static compost covered by large tarps and sprinkling systems. Marya led us to one of the largest piles and peeled apart the layers to show us the lasagna structure. The women could see the different stages of decomposition within the pile, and also mark the pros and cons of a static compost pile. Damiana then uncovered a completely decomposed pile and then introduced an activity to get the women involved.



Women grabbed shovels and began shoveling compost onto a mesh screen, where others began to push around the compost to separate the larger chunks of brown matter from the rich soil.

Our efforts finally yielded a full wheelbarrow of rich dark soil. And the women all put hands into the soil to feel the moisture, the density, the richness of the earth, all the while nodding their heads appreciatively.

At the end of the day, we all walked away with a greater appreciation of the opportunities that simple alterations to our habits and practices regarding the disposal of food or plant waste can offer.



The next week, Trinidad spoke about wanting a discussion about metabolism. So I compiled another fact-sheet about metabolism. What foods to avoid and what foods to eat to speed up your metabolism. I also stressed that decreasing calories too drastically can actually slow your



metabolism down, instead they should cycle their carb intake every day and incorporate varied high intensity workouts and cross training into their exercise routine. Due to unfortunate circumstances, I was not able to be present at the meeting on the 14th and Elizabeth facilitated the discussion in my stead.

That Wednesday, there was another workshop with Wild Willow except this time, we focused on container gardening and seasonal planting. All the women brought one gallon jugs for their water reservoirs and the first ten minutes were spent hacking off the tops to allow the PVC pipes and cloth to fit through into the jugs. The mechanism behind the reservoir relies on the adhesion qualities of water. The cloth wicks the water up from the jug and into the surrounding soil. The pipe allows for an easy refill of the reservoir. Since the soil is being watered internally, less of it evaporates from the top of soil and thanks to the reservoir, watering is less time intensive—both a huge plus for the community. Damiana led a discussion about the concept of container gardening. She gave several specifications for the containers—for example, the plant to pot ratio so that the plant has enough room and nutrients to grow. Or that the container should be exposed to 5-6 hours of light, but still have enough water to be moist—not dripping. However, what wasn't specified was the type of container. In fact we could plant in nearly every container—it doesn't have to be nice-looking to be useful. However, since containers are smaller, soil nutrients are often depleted faster than if it was in a garden. A good way to keep the soil healthy, is to add compost, mulch, or even peanut shells. Daniela also inspected the raised beds that the 2016 cohort built. Since the beds were neglected during the renovation of the community rec center, the soil had become dry, compact and listless. She recommended a full renovation of the beds and the installation of a composting system—even suggesting that we could adapt the water reservoirs in the containers for the larger, raised bed.



