

‘FoodPlay’ is Big Success At Mehoopany Elementary

—BY D.C. KOVIACK—



Carlos Leon, left, and Alyssa Bryner juggled, sang and danced their way into young students' minds in Mehoopany on Tuesday as they presented FoodPlay, a series of skits intended to educate and delight children about the value of eating a healthy diet. Photos by D. C. Koviack

The innovative and actionpacked presentation, appropriately named Food- Play, captivated the Kindergarten through fourth grade students at Mehoopany Elementary School on Tuesday afternoon. Although its message was serious and important, the creator of the live theatre event, Barbara Storper, MS, RD, managed to send that message through multiple channels in a way that was fun and engaging. The 50- minute production featured a series of fast-moving skits, peppy and familiar music, and, best of all, two outstandingly personable and relatable performers.

The play is about Janey the Juggler, a young girl who dreams of becoming a juggling star, but who is held back by her unhealthy diet. With the help of her coach, and with interaction from the children in the audience, Janey learns about healthy foods that can make her strong and smart and help her to achieve her goals.

The biggest success and the best part about FoodPlay is that it immediately involves the children in the audience in the predicament of Janey and the attempts made by Coach to help her eat a healthier diet. Through question and answer, skits, songs, games and direct address, the same message is repeated: healthy food, exercise through play and confidence building messages add up to a strong, smart individual who has a good chance of achieving his or her goals.

Noting that food and play are two of his favorite subjects, Coach first presents what he calls “go foods” and “whoa foods;” the latter are processed items loaded with refined sugars, salt and fat that should only be eaten occasionally. The former are varieties of healthy foods including yogurt, fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

The program addresses the importance of breakfast and lunch and stresses the availability of healthy meals at school. “If you don’t have time to eat breakfast at home,” explains Coach, “you can get it at school and get your fuel.”

The young audiences are warned to watch out for sugar, particularly in soda. With the average child drinking 600 cans of soda a year and with 10 teaspoons of sugar in each can of soda, Coach and Janey present the horrors of tooth decay. An impressive “soak in the Coke” display brings the message home, as does Coach’s witticism, “be true to your teeth, or they will be false to you.”

Through short rhymes and songs, the children are encouraged to read their food labels before they buy or eat a food: “read it before you eat it,” is the slogan, delivered with accompanying hand gestures and a final “chomp, chomp” that had the audience mimicking the actors almost immediately.

The program also took TV and advertising to task, explaining that the goal of these commercials and magazines is to make money, not necessarily to encourage healthy eating. Food- Play also spends a segment discussing different “play” games that are also exercise. “Exercise should be fun,” exclaims Janey.

Meal planning, food groups, food density, colorful foods, balanced diets, it is all covered in the relatively brief and very entertaining presentation. FoodPlay is broken up into short segments featuring different “entertainment” aspects, so it changes frequently and presents new diversions in an almost kaleidoscopic effect. This approach is specifically geared to maximize the attention spans of its young audience and to keep them alert, focused and interested.

“Veggies, veggies: eat them” is chanted to the tune of “We Will We Will Rock You,” for example, giving the children a short, vivid and memorable catch phrase that may encourage them to eat more healthily.

With the problem of childhood obesity in the United States growing ever greater, programs that encourage young children to adopt a healthy lifestyle by creating value for them in that lifestyle are crucial. The 110 students and their teachers certainly seemed to enjoy and be impressed by Food- Play.

Following the presentation, the children received tote bags with fun rubber tracker bands to show how many fruits and vegetables they eat every day, along with a passport and stickers to show how many new foods they try as they implement what they learn at FoodPlay. In addition, all the students, as well as their teachers, were given special bright green “Give Peas a Chance” FoodPlay t-shirts.

After her tutelage from Coach is finished, Janey attempts to make the National Juggling Team, and the children in the audience are almost breathless with anticipation, they have become so caught up in Janey’s dilemma.

“I can do this,” chants Janey, and the audience echoes.

When she successfully performs a series of quite amazing juggling feats, and is accepted onto the team, the audience erupts in applause and whoops.

FoodPlay is a feel-good, energy driven presentation with an important message, something that not only children, but their parents and teachers, will enjoy and remember.

At Mehoopany Elementary, Janey was vividly brought to life by Alyssa Bryner, a Penn State graduate with a BA in Theatre. The Coach was played with aplomb and humor by Carlos Leon, a graduate of Florida Southern College with a BFA in Theatre Performance. Stage Manager Stephanie Thompson, a Central Connecticut State University graduate with a BFA in Technical Theatre and Design, provided props, lights and sound effects with precision and expertise.

FoodPlay was sponsored by the Wyoming County Community Health Foundation and Procter & Gamble.



Shealynn Shabe of the Wyoming County Community Health Foundation models the “Give Peas a Chance” t-shirts given to all the audience members at Tuesday’s Mehoopany performance of FoodPlay. Photos by D. C. Koviack