Bronx kids from food-desert neighborhood take first trip to farmer’s market

By Jason Cohen

Children from the PS/MS 218 summer camp visit WHEDco’s Urban Horizons garden.

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Many Bronx communities, including the Moribana neighborhood, are considered “food swamps” – inundated with fast food and limited healthy options. With that in mind, one organization is looking to educate local kids about the importance of identifying quality foods to foster a healthier living.

The Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco), a South Bronx community development nonprofit organization, is teaching kids about growing, cooking and eating fresh produce through a gardening program at its summer camp. Located at PS/MS 218, the program this year was part of the city’s new “Summer Rising” initiative, a free school-based summer program for any city child in grades K–8.
The camp uses Urban Horizons’ 2,000-square-foot garden and greenhouse to grow nutritious produce like squash, eggplant, red peppers, edamame, berries and herbs.

On Aug. 17, WHEDco took a group of middle-school aged campers on their first-ever trip to a farmers market – the Bronx Borough Hall Greenmarket. They had “health bucks” provided by the city to buy locally grown fruit and vegetables.

“They were blown away by the farmer’s market and the options they could get,” said Program Director Nicole Jennings. “Initially, I didn’t think they would be as excited as they were. I think it turned out much better than I expected.”

Jennings told the Bronx Times that typically the children go on trips with the camp a few times a week. However, since most of them did not show up to class this past school year due to the COVID pandemic, they had to attend summer school. Therefore, for about
500 kids, the camp only ran from 12:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. Jennings and her staff had to find alternative things for them to do instead.

While they had done programs in the garden in the past, it was never on a consistent basis, she said. According to Jennings, many of the kids in the camp come from low-income communities with little access or knowledge about fresh food. So, they decided to utilize the garden and teach them about sustainability, healthy food and gardening. The kids made foods like kebabs and pizzas, among other garden-related activities.

“We’ve been trying hard to do what we can with the kids and the garden was an essential piece with that,” she said. “The garden was a useful tool because we could get them out of the classroom.”

In addition to planting fruits and veggies, the staff took the kids to a local grocery store and a Whole Foods in Manhattan to educate them on the disparities of fresh food between boroughs.

The C-Town in the Bronx had about 95% processed food and half an aisle of fresh food, while Whole Foods had six or seven aisles of fresh food. This really took the students by surprise, Jennings said. Jennings added that many of the children are used to eating unhealthy items at their local bodega, so she hopes they now know there are other options.

“I really wanted them to get a perspective to see how little access there is to fresh food,” Jennings said.

The feedback from the youths was positive and some even said they want to be farmers when they are older. While camp will hopefully run all day next year, regardless Jennings said the garden will be incorporated more.

“I want them to go on back on trips, but we will utilize [the garden] more,” she said.
