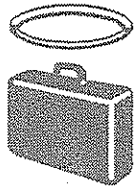




Kelly Yang from Grant Union High School watch their salsa being bottled at Sonoma Gourmet Specialty Food Co.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GRANT UNION HIGH SCHOOL

Students learn about business, nutrition through salsa sales



Partners in Philanthropy 2010

MELANIE TURNER | STAFF WRITER

What started as a project to keep teenagers in school turned into a self-sustaining small business run by students at Grant Union High School — thanks in part to a grant from the United Way California Capital Region.

The student-run salsa business, Eat from the Garden, was just one small part of a broader United Way project known as Turning Teens Toward Success. That project, and the funding behind it, recently ended after five years. The United Way gave \$475,000 a year to many projects under the umbrella program, Turning Teens Toward Success.

Eat from the Garden is now integrated into the curriculum for seniors at Grant Union High School.

"We're proud because initially what we were funding was a healthy eating project at Grant High School," said Steve Heath, president and chief executive officer of United Way California Capital Region.

But over the years, the project—in partnership with the Health Education Council—transitioned from an after-school program to being part of the school curriculum. Students learn about sustainable agriculture — and business.

"In the process of growing all these veggies, the kids started making salsa, and it was really good salsa," Heath said. "Pretty soon the demand outstripped the product."

The students didn't have enough room in their garden at Grant Union High to grow enough vegetables, Heath said.

So, the students began to partner with local businesses, including Rominger Farms near Winters, which grows organic tomatoes for the salsa, Campbell Soup Co. and Sonoma Gourmet Specialty Food Co., which bottles the students' traditional and spicy peach salsa recipes.

While the salsa is now produced at Sonoma Gourmet, each year the students visit farmer Bruce Rominger to learn about the production cycle, from seeding and planting to pest management, and they

travel to Sonoma on bottling day. "They get a real sense of how the majority of food today is produced," said Ann Marie Kennedy, a teacher for a program at Grant known as GEO — for Grant Environmental Organization.

The students also manage invoices for markets and community events, create marketing materials and conduct demonstrations at area markets.

The products are sold at the Sacramento and Davis food co-ops, Taylor's Market, Davis Farmers' Market and other area stores and markets. Proceeds go toward the garden project at Grant Union High School, scholarships and educational field trips.

"We were targeting an at-risk population," Heath said. "Our measure of success was not whether they were selling salsa, but what percentage of kids dropped out."

The results, he said, were "fabulous."

"For this particular cadre of kids, 99.99 percent stayed in school," he said. Grant graduates often return to help keep the program going. The school also taps the talents of college interns and professionals who volunteer their services, whether it be to help students learn accounting procedures and QuickBooks or help them develop a new label for the salsa, as marketing professional Catherine Moulton recently did.

To date, between 250 and 300 students have participated in the salsa business, from learning how to write a proper business letter or make a professional phone call to mentoring elementary school kids. The students have sold nearly 10,000 jars of salsa in seven years.

The school's primary partner in developing the business was the Health Education Council, a certified United Way partner. The school worked with the organizations to develop the business. Grant funding helped the school develop a curriculum.

HEC contracted with the nonprofit Opening Doors, which offers small-business training, to develop business aspects of the curriculum while HEC came up with a nutrition and healthy cooking component.

Students work in teams focused on sales, marketing, finance and operations.

"I can't say it's super profitable," Kennedy said, adding that it is definitely a learning experience complete with all the challenges of running a business.

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