



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/HERALD STAFF

GOOD, AND GOOD FOR YOU: Heart surgeon Dr. Federico Benetti, center, samples vegetarian food prepared by Bay Point Schools culinary students on Sunday.

Brain food: Student vegans see boost in grades, energy

Everyone wants to encourage troubled teens to change their lifestyles. But what about their eating habits?

At Bay Point Schools, an experiment with vegetarianism could be the recipe for success. The alternative public school's culinary arts program challenged its students to be vegans for one month — and the achievements have been sprouting.

"I came in here with a 1.6 [grade-point average]. That's not even a passing grade. At this point I've got a 3.4," said Willie Williams, who concedes that at first he was skeptical of the vegetables. "I'd look at a rib and I'd look at a vegetable, and I'd think, 'Why is my mind picking the vegetable?'"

But Willie, who plays football and basketball, soon noticed improvement both in the classroom and on the field and court. He plans to continue drinking his requisite eight glasses of water a day — and remain a vegetarian.

"I'm considering doing this for a long time, just make it a constant thing," Willie said. "I think it will help me in my future."

Willie is among the six vocational students who completed the program at Bay Point's South Miami-Dade County campus, 25005 SW 133rd Ave. Even more from the class of 19 joined in as the course progressed. Donning chef hats and checked pants, several spoke of the impact of the regimen on their lives at a graduation ceremony Sunday.

NO DOWN TIME

"They seem to have a lot more energy — they don't have the down times," said Mary Louise Cole, who founded the year-round residential school for students 13 to 18 years old.



FAMILY DINNER: Amanda Davila gives her brother David, holding nephew Sedrick Clay, a taste of food on Sunday.

Warren Keirn, 16, is among those taking it one bite at a time. At first he expected to break the diet, but he stayed on it once he discovered its impact on his vitality. When he was supposed to wake up at 4:30 a.m. to work, Warren found himself getting up early. "I never knew chicken and cows had so many hormones," he said. "Now everything I eat is natural."

'MAKE IT FUN'

"Most kids have a hard time accepting vegetables and whole grains in their diet. I want them to learn to eat these foods because, traditionally, they don't," said Antonia Demas, president of the Food Studies Institute, who worked with the school's kitchen supervisors to implement the program. Her secret to making the classes appetizing: "Put food in curriculum, make it fun, make it hands on, make it sensory based."

Demas, who has been a vegetarian for 36 years, led the students on field trips to organic farms and encouraged them not only to cook, but also to plan menus. Some of the budding

chefs were even inspired to invent their own recipes.

"PSV Stew" is what Kovanic Capron, 17, calls his creation of potatoes, stir-fry vegetables and veggie burger. Even after the allotted vegetarian period is over, he plans to limit his meat intake. "I feel vibrant when I wake up in the morning. During the day, my mind is clear," said the student, whose grade-point average improved from 3.1 to 3.9.

He's not the only one whose schoolwork has improved. According to one instructor, nobody scored below 85 on the final exam. And students say that being a vegetarian has got them chewing up the competition in sports.

"I used to get tired when I ran laps or lifted weights. Now I get endurance and keep on doing it," said Gabriel Saintvil, 18.

Most of the students were sent to Bay Point by the court system after committing offenses. "We're dealing with students who came from the streets," said kitchen supervisor Abraham Ruiz. "They have a hunger to improve in everything that they do."