

AROUND TOMPKINS COUNTY

T-burg nutritionist turns school lunch into a healthy feast

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TRUMANSBURG — Trumansburg resident Antonia Demas is working to make regular school lunch staples like corn dogs, turkey fricassee, fish sticks and sloppy joes a grease stain of the past.

A small feature on Demas appeared in the October issue of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s political magazine *George* that describes her efforts to replace the standard artery-clogging cafeteria fare associated with the National School Lunch Program with healthier foods through her own Food Studies Institute.

Demas' program, which she developed while writing her nutrition doctoral thesis at Cornell University three years ago, involves teaching children the history and origin of foods in the classroom, helping them prepare dishes and grow vegetables and fruits, and then serving the same foods in the lunchroom.

"We're becoming a culture that is dependent on fast foods and microwaves," Demas said.

For example, kids are learning the agricultural connection between potatoes, cabbage and apples and Halloween, and that long ago, Europeans carved turnips before New World crops like pumpkins invaded Europe.

Demas said adults assume kids won't eat ethnic or vegetarian foods, but once children know exactly what a food is and where it comes from, she

said they will eat dishes like East Indian black beans with rice pilaf and Mediterranean salad.

"It's very rational for kids to reject foods when they don't know what they really are," Demas said.

Schools in New Mexico, Massachusetts, New York City and Rochester have participated in Demas' academic and cultural food program. Some schools hire outside food educators, use graduate students or have regular teachers instructing kids on the edibles' origins.

Demas did her original studies for her doctorate with Trumansburg kids and said the Trumansburg Central School District is interested in picking up the program again when funding becomes available.

Fourteen other schools across the United States have expressed interest in integrating Demas' nutrition program into their academic curriculum, but raising the funds necessary is a problem.

Demas has given all her time on a volunteer basis, and other school districts had the benefit of receiving private grants and using budget surpluses.

Despite funding setbacks, Demas said serving healthier food is inexpensive. Most program dishes range from 35 cents to 65 cents per meal for preparation, and she said beans, a common ingredient, are provided free to schools as a U.S. Department of Agriculture commodity food.