

Inside

the life of a

Community Nutrition Assistant

Nimco's day began with grocery shopping. She was running a program this morning to promote good nutrition for a group of moms and today was a food preparation day. The mothers were all newcomers to Canada from Somalia – as Nimco herself had been – and Nimco was going to introduce them to some fruits that they may never have eaten. But she also made a point of buying broccoli.

She had introduced broccoli to the group last week, and it had been a hard sell. It bore a distinct resemblance to a plant they fed to cattle in Somalia, and the group couldn't imagine why Nimco was trying to get them to eat it. She explained that it was relatively inexpensive, easy to find, one of the healthiest vegetables around and – in Nimco's opinion – quite delicious. So she had decided to bring broccoli every time she was preparing food to add it to dishes or prepare it as a



side dish, determined to win some broccoli converts.

The program this morning was held in the basement of a mosque that had a small kitchen and an adjacent room for daycare. Nimco arrived at 9:00 to set up and be ready by 9:30 – but she knew that people weren't likely to show

up until 10:00 or so. Nimco remembered that she, too, had taken a while to adjust to the different sense of time that was taken for granted in Canada.

This morning's program was part of a Public Health initiative that reached out to caregivers of young children

in marginalized communities, to help them provide the best nutrition for their families. Public Health had realized that the most effective way to do that was to recruit and train Community Nutrition Assistants from within those communities: only a peer from the same culture, speaking the same language, would know what the food customs were, and how to present new information and experiences in a way that earned the trust of the participants. The recruiting had gone well, tapping into underutilized resources – Nimco herself had some training in nutrition. Altogether, Public Health was able to offer the program in thirty languages.

By 10:15 everyone was present and the session was underway. This was the third of six two-hour sessions that were held once a week. As with many cultures, the challenge in each session was to help the women become more comfortable with a range of healthy foods and ways of preparing them, while remaining sensitive to practices they had grown up with. In general, these women did not eat a lot of vegetables, and had more salt and oil in their diets than was healthy. Nimco was able to explain the need to change those customs in terms of their own experience. In Somalia a great deal of salt was lost through sweat; eating the same amount here could lead to high blood pressure. Everyone had walked more in Somalia, burning off the calories in oil – but here, they agreed, they were more sedentary, and the same amount of oil in the diet would lead to health problems.

In the course of the morning Nimco introduced the women to apples, pears, guava and honeydew melon. When she cut open the honeydew, most women were seeing a green melon for the first time – and one woman warned that green melon was not good to eat. Another had heard that the drugs in green melon made you sleepy. Nimco explained that honeydew



was a very popular food because it was so delicious, and that she ate it often and never felt sleepy afterwards. By the end of the session, she noticed that all the slices had been eaten.

Very often Nimco was the only person these women had ever met from Public Health, and because of the trust she earned she was often asked for help. At the end of today's session one of the women had asked if she could help her write a resume. Others had come to her with problems ranging from abuse, to crises in housing, to depression. She always listened carefully and did what she could to help – either linking them to a Public Health professional, or to an agency within the community.

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In the afternoon Nimco had a session with another Somali group in a Parks and Rec centre. The topic today was cheese. Many of the people in this group were Muslim, and believed that non-Halal cheese had animal products that were forbidden by Islamic law. Nimco explained that some cheeses did have by-products from animals, but was able to show them other cheeses

that were free of such products, and then showed them how to read the label to tell the difference.

As Nimco drove back to her office, she thought about how happy one of the women had been to discover that she could safely buy cheese for her family. Perhaps next week, she mused, she might introduce them to an after-school snack that her own children enjoyed: cheese with apple wedges.

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