



Jalia Her makes a stir-fry during an after-school Sustainable Solano Healthy Food program at Armijo High School in Fairfield, Wednesday, March 1, 2023. (Aaron Rosenblatt/Daily Republic)

Healthy Food curriculum takes Armijo students from garden to kitchen to video room

By [Daily Republic Staff](#)

FAIRFIELD — Nico James-Singh and Jalia Her share a vision for their futures.

Each wants to make films – or a similar vocation – as their life's work. They even teamed up to take second place in a recent video contest, which was good enough to move them onto the state competition.

They are members of the Multimedia Academy at Armijo High, with Her, a senior, serving as president. They also find themselves among 22 of their club mates and six other Armijo students in the first-year, after-school Healthy Food Program.

They are learning how to grow food, prepare it in the kitchen – and closer to their own pallets – produce a video or some other multimedia piece about the experience.

They meet from 2:45 to 4:45 p.m. each Wednesday.

Three groups of five students were busy March 1 preparing a stir-fry dish with a scallion ginger sauce. Several students were videotaping the work, another was taking photographs and still others were jotting down notes in their work journals.

But all eventually do cook – collaborate on the preparation and how much spice and other tastes need to be included – and then eat their creations.

Stephanie Oelsligle-Jordan is the adviser in the kitchen. Her background includes running a catering company in Chicago.

"I try to give them a lot of the basics that I had in culinary school," said Oelsligle-Jordan, which begins with safety, sanitation and knife skills.

Getting the food ready to cook is an art form in itself.



Of course, the students must also learn how to use all their senses, and trust them.

Her describes herself as a picky eater, so last week's Moroccan spiced and roasted vegetables and couscous – tiny steamed balls of semolina flour – was not particularly to her liking.

James-Singh loved it, especially the couscous.

"This is a test of skills, and I have to challenge myself," said James-Singh, who used the home school time during the Covid-19 pandemic to improve and polish his multimedia skills.

David Avery, a mentor at the Multimedia Academy, having taught ROTC at Fairfield High for 13 years, then used his GI Bill to learn about film and video production.

He said he is also getting an education now, as the students clue him in on what is out in their world, such as mukbang – a Korean online eating show.

"And I'm trying to get them to write," he said.

The one thing that has surprised Avery, he said, was "how much the kids really do like the cooking part of it."

The three-kitchen classroom in which they work is borrowed from a special education independent life skills course taught by Michelle Bolden. It includes cooking skills, personal finance lessons and washing and drying clothes among other abilities they will need. They even help the Healthy Food students with that chore by cleaning the aprons and towels and other items that need washing.

The students go out in the community and work a set number of hours each week, for which, of course, they do get paid, and they work in the same garden the Healthy Food students use: the Jardin de la Esperanza, or Garden of Hope.

"We started to talk about it in 2018 and installed it in 2019," said Sylvia Herrera, the "garden teacher," who also heads the Garden Club that started the garden project. She teaches freshman and junior English.

"I definitely incorporate (the garden experience) into my classes," Herrera said.

Paris Thompson, a freshman, talked about the connections she has learned about: How the work they do in the garden connects with the work they do in the kitchen, which in turn connects with other life experiences.

They have even learned how important their senses are in the garden.

Wendy Heredia, a junior, agreed, calling those connections “with the world and the community around you; it’s a real eye-opener.”

Other students talked about the relationships they are building. Because so many are part of the Multimedia Academy, they were aware of each other, even knew each other at one level or another. But this experience has brought them closer – and through the food – they have also learned more about each other’s family cultures.

The topic of instruction March 1 was the potato.

The Healthy Food Program is run through Sustainable Solano, with funding from the Solano County Public Health Division and a state Department of Food and Agriculture grant. Innovative Health Solution is also a partner that helps fund the programs.

There are 30 students in the program – chosen from 60 applicants. When 15 are in the garden, the other 15 are in the kitchen. Each receives a \$150 monthly stipend, but there are no academic credits applied. The stipends come from Public Health program funds.

The students will continue the weekly routine through March into April and then focus more on their multimedia project. The best of those will be used to educate the rest of the student body on healthy living, and will even be presented to the community.

That will include a program website they are building now.

“Ms. Allison Nagel, the tireless director of Sustainable Solano, working with the amazing Armijo High School College and Career adviser Ms. Sandy Anderson, and Armijo High teacher Ms. Herrera have forged a powerful partnership between school and community that is a model for teaching and learning and community engagement. As principal of Armijo High School, these are the types of relationships that allow students to thrive and benefit the school and society,” John McMorris noted in a written comment.

Others involved in the program include Lauren Gucik and Noah Galgan from Sustainable Solano, and Anthony Gonzalez, another multimedia instructor.

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