

AN INNOVATIVE PARENT NIGHT AT SCHOOL: THEY CAME, THEY COOKED, THEY CONNECTED

On a rainy February night, parents and children gathered for dinner at the John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Somerville, MA. The evening, sponsored by Colavita USA and the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA), centered on bringing families together around a delicious, healthy meal of salad, pasta with homemade sauce, turkey meatballs, and baked apples created especially for the occasion.

Food was not the only item on the agenda, however. A presentation by the Quaglia Institute and several family-centered activities were designed to help parents get involved in their children's education through a good old-fashioned family dinner. "One of the greatest resources schools have is parents," said Dr. Russell J. Quaglia, president and founder of QISA, "yet it can be difficult to attract parents to school events. Tonight is about having a spirit of adventure. It's about trying a new approach to the parent-school relationship."

Connecting

Dr. Quaglia and the QISA staff worked closely with Somerville educators to make the evening a reality. Dr. Tony Pierantozzi, Superintendent of the Somerville school district, helped out in the kitchen preparing food. "This is an evening to learn from each other and the Quaglia Institute," he stated. "It gives families a chance to have some good food and develop a sense of connection to each other and the school." Gretchen Kinder, Coordinator of R & D Public Information and Grants, added that the dinner also connected with Somerville's healthy living goals by supporting the notion of healthy families.

As families entered the Kennedy School's cafeteria, they found the space transformed from its daily use as a lunch room. White table cloths and bouquets of flowers were on the tables, along with bottles of Colavita olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Platters of cheese, crackers and vegetables—as well as apple juice and water—lined a table near the kitchen. The delicious smell of a hot pasta dinner filled the room.

Dr. Michael Corso, Director of Field Services at QISA, welcomed the guests and asked each family to introduce itself. Doing so helped create a sense of Belonging among the evening's guests and the cafeteria quickly became a community of families gathered for the evening.

Conversing

Dr. Corso went on to share some important ideas with the participants. “Aspirations,” he said, “is the ability to dream about the future while taking steps in the present to reach those goals. To have aspirations, you must be a dreamer and a doer. The problem is that some people are dreamers—they have lots of ideas but don’t do anything to reach them. Other people are doers—they work hard but don’t have any goals to work toward. We all need to find ways to be dreamers and doers. Then we can really reach our fullest potential.” [For more on dreamers and doers see The Aspirations Profile <http://www.qisa.org/aspirations.php>]

Families spent some time talking about these ideas. Jerry, age 9, said he wanted to be a doctor or a teacher. To reach those goals, he declared, he would need to do his homework and study hard. Thais, age 15, was at the dinner because her younger brother goes to the Kennedy School. She said she learned about the category of “Imagination”—people who are dreamers but not doers. “I can be like that,” she said. “I need to try to take steps toward my goals. I love to sing!”

Dr. Quaglia then taught the families how to make their own salad dressing using the Colavita olive oil and vinegar—donated by the company for the event, along with sauce and gift baskets—on their tables. Families worked together to create their dressing and then watched as Dr. Quaglia showed them how to make a salad with the fresh vegetables provided by a local store. “Be creative,” he said. “Add all different types of ingredients, make it colorful. Don’t be afraid to try something new.”

After enjoying their individually-designed salads, Dr. Corso talked about the importance of heroes. “Heroes are everyday people who believe in us, who we can turn to in good times and bad, and who are there for us when we need them. While your family eats together, share who your heroes are with each other.”

Over dinner the cafeteria was filled with lively conversation among families. At one table, Camille, age 8, and her sister Connie, age 10, talked with their mother about heroes. Camille said, “My mom is my hero because she always takes care of me.” Connie added, “My whole family is my hero. They provide me with hope.”

At another table, Hernane, age 8, told his family: “My sister is my hero because she helps me with my homework.” Aaron, age 8, loved talking about his heroes: “My hero is my grandfather for teaching me to play tennis. I am always willing to learn from my grandfather!” Aaron also thought that the night was special because he got to spend time with his mom and make her a special apple dessert.

In fact, another highlight of the evening was Dr. Quaglia’s secret recipe for baked apples [for the recipe see www.colavita.com “The Aspirations Baked Apple” recipe]. After sharing the recipe, he invited everyone to get a baked apple and add their own toppings.

Caring

Dr. Quaglia summed up the evening as follows: “Creative events like tonight allow parents and children to spend time together, talk with one another, learn together and have fun. The lesson of tonight is that if schools offer meaningful, productive, and rewarding events, parents will attend. The challenge facing educators is to be courageous enough to try new things that reach out to the local community.”

Each family left the evening well-fed and more connected to the school and each other. They also received a gift basket of products from Colavita oil and educational resources from the Quaglia Institute. “We are so grateful to our sponsors,” said Sara Cerretani, Operations Manager at the Quaglia Institute. “Events like these succeed because generous volunteers and organizations donate their time and resources. It is all worth it when we see the families enjoy themselves and each other.”

Jo Ann Riveccio, who led the kitchen staff during the event, said that the evening was very inspirational. “We need to encourage our kids to reach for the stars,” she said. On a cold rainy February night, this is exactly what the John F. Kennedy Elementary School did.

The menu for the evening was planned by Colavita chef, Barbara Seelig Brown, host of the *Stress Free Cooking Show* and *Back to School Fuel-Kid Zones* (see www.stressfreecooking.com). Other sponsors included: Shady Brook Farms; Stop & Shop, Somerville; Target, Somerville; Leisure Line, Haverhill; Food Services, Somerville.