CCE FMNP Educator Spotlight: Nicole Borukhov

In past years, the CCE Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) Outreach Leadership Team has done a series of spotlight interviews with nutrition educators to highlight the important work they do with FMNP. This spotlight showcases Nicole Borukhov, the Nutrition, Health, and Wellness program manager with CCE Nassau County.

Keep reading for the full interview with Nicole, and learn more about her experiences working with CCE and FMNP, strategies for adapting to challenges at the farmers market, and how she works with communities to promote healthy eating.
What is your position with CCE, and what do you do in your current role?
I’ve been with CCE Nassau since the end of 2018, so about 4 and a half years. My position has changed since I started, and my current title is the Nutrition, Health, and Wellness program manager. I started out as a community nutrition educator, and my position has grown since then.

I manage our different nutrition and wellness programs based out of our headquarters at Eisenhower Park. We are primarily grant funded, so I manage the budgets for those grants, lead a team of educators that provide programming, in addition to grant writing and program development. I still do community engagement and outreach myself, but we have a team that works together to get everything done.

How did you first get involved with CCE and FMNP?
I am a registered dietitian (RD) with a Masters Degree in nutrition from Stony Brook University. I volunteered with CCE in New York City when I was finishing my second bachelor’s degree before I became an RD, so I had some experience volunteering with the NYC team at farmers markets doing nutrition education. I always had extension in the back of my mind as a non-traditional opportunity for a dietitian or nutrition educator in the community and public health space. So fast forward, I became an RD, I finished my master’s, and I was working as a clinical dietitian at a hospital in Brooklyn. But I always knew that I preferred the community nutrition space. When there was a part-time position open in Nassau County, I applied to get my foot in the door because these opportunities are so few and far between.

We started our journey with the FMNP vouchers during the pandemic because of our work with older adults. We have an operating farm at our Dorothy P. Flint 4-H Camp, so we applied to accept FMNP and it snowballed from there. I was doing informal nutrition education and part of the farm stands in mobile markets accepting FMNP without really knowing that it was its own nutrition program.

What motivates you to continue working with CCE?
Every day is different and it’s very dynamic. I’m not stuck behind a desk and I get to work with a lot of different communities. We primarily focus on underserved communities in need, and there is a lot of disparity on the island that we encounter. I think there’s an assumption that Long Island is this affluent place, but there’s pockets of poverty just like anywhere else. There are a lot of communities that have high needs, and I like working with people in the community as opposed to more of a clinical setting.

I like the people I work with— extension isn’t just nutrition, not just horticulture, not just one thing. I’m constantly collaborating with the 4-H team, Master Gardeners at our East Meadow Farm, and other program managers to find a comprehensive program for a community or agency. CCE is dynamic and exciting and you feel like you’re making a difference.
Is there any part of your job that you find the most rewarding?
I think that the farmers markets we’ve been involved with since 2020 have been the most rewarding because it’s so tangible. In 2020, the senior centers were closed. We had a farm out at our 4-H camp, and the food wasn’t going to the campers because the camp was closed. So I used my personal vehicle at the time just to figure out a way to get the produce to the participants at the senior centers.

The seniors have the FMNP coupons and we have the fresh produce, and it’s transactional but it’s very tangible as far as the impact we have, because otherwise the coupons would go to waste. The farmers wouldn’t get the money and the seniors wouldn’t eat the produce, so in doing this you can really see all of the different ways that the program is working. I like the markets and market season– it’s busy! This time of year is so hectic and crazy, but it’s rewarding and a lot of fun, and the seniors are always asking us to come back.

Do you do nutrition education at the markets as well as sell produce?
When we can, we do. We always have a nutrition educator on site, but because of the pace of the market sometimes the nutrition educator is at the register or restocking the tables. We always have passive education, like recipes and nutrition handouts. However, even during those transactional conversations there’s room to talk to people like “oh, how do you cook your cabbage?” or “did you know you can do this” or “I love it with this spice.”

We really try to get nutrition education in when we can. When we have an extra volunteer then we can set up a separate table for more engagement. We try just to talk with people so it doesn’t feel like we’re lecturing or that we’re trying to push anything down people’s throats– it’s more casual and informal.

Have you noticed any trends in topics that people are talking about at farmers markets?
The number one thing that people talk about is the price of food. We try to be affordable. We're not looking at other local farmers markets and trying to compete with $6 a pound for an heirloom tomato. Whatever we don't grow, we outsource from local farms. We are very conscious about what we buy and how much we price things at, and for the most part, we’re just trying to break even to cover the wholesale cost and gas. Sometimes our prices are way better than a grocery store – yesterday somebody was like “this is only $10. I’ve been shopping at Whole Foods– what am I doing at Whole Foods?” Price is always a topic, though it’s not necessarily nutrition specific.

We try to provide culturally appropriate foods when we can, and our farmer also dabbles in experimental crops. He'll grow callaloo or bok choy or ginger, which are culturally specific and not everyone may be familiar with. Then though, it’s an educational opportunity for somebody to
be exposed to something they might not otherwise cook. That’s how we try to start the conversation, with “what’s your favorite recipe” or “have you had this before?”

**Do you have any techniques for getting people engaged in a conversation about nutrition at the market?**
Other than talking about the recipes, when people are already at the table, it’s good to show people something unfamiliar. Like when broccoli at the market has way more branches than broccoli at the grocery store and you say to kids “did you know that broccoli has arms?” Last week there was mint growing at the farm, and it wasn’t nice enough to sell, but we put it in a basket and asked people if they wanted to touch it or smell it. We also have garlic scapes, which can be a teachable moment because it looks so different and interesting.

Sometimes we offer something like that for free to try and take home as to start the conversation and not scare people away from something new. Especially with the seniors we try to create a bundle like the “bundle of the day” that has a recipe associated with it, like a salsa bundle. The bundles are a little more affordable than buying things separately and then with the recipe people aren’t discouraged by not knowing how to use an ingredient.

**What have you found to be challenging about working with CCE or FMNP?**
Not being able to reach everybody. As a participating FMNP market, we need a set schedule to be approved by Ag & Markets. So we’re at the same location every week in Nassau County. Again, there’s an assumption that it’s a more affluent area but transportation is a big issue— we don’t have a significant public transportation network. Some populations, like older adults, can’t even get a few blocks away. We’re trying to accommodate that by having participants bussed in to one of our farm stands from the senior centers we work with.

I feel badly because we get a lot of requests for us to come to them, but in order for us to participate in FMNP, we can’t reach everyone. We try to find a way to serve those who are most vulnerable but also make sure that we’re doing what we need to do to participate in the program. If we can’t accept the coupons there’s no way we’re going to increase coupon redemption.

**Is the program thinking about expanding?**
Every year things change a little bit in good ways and we try to accommodate for new challenges. We work with the Office for the Aging and received funding for a refrigerated vehicle. Our farm and our partnering farms are located in Suffolk County, so we bring the produce from Suffolk into Nassau. The refrigerated vehicle is great, but that means we’re restricted by how much we can fit in the van. This year, we’re planning to convert a shed into cold storage so that we can keep produce there, giving us more flexibility to serve more people. So we’re trying to expand— I think a longer term goal would be some sort of food hub.
Is there anything that surprised you about this program or you didn't expect when you started working for FMNP or CCE?

I didn't realize that it was a comprehensive program. I thought FMNP coupons, that’s it. But understanding the connection with the Extension network and that there’s an education component too. I’m not just scrambling for resources and there is a cohesive program happening statewide and I can be involved and get shared resources, which is really helpful. Also I can engage with others about shared experiences: what works, what doesn’t work, how to best engage with people. I didn’t know about that– to be part of a network with like-minded educators is nice.

Farmers markets are one of my favorite things that I do, but it’s still one part of what I do. Every year I feel like I’m still learning more. I don’t know yet, I feel like there’s just so much more to learn.

Special thanks to Nicole Borukhov for her time and insights, and Sarah Rudolph-Naiberg, a nutrition student at Cornell, for conducting the interview. Please note that the perspectives presented in these interviews do not necessarily reflect the positions of FMNP, Cornell University, and/or Cornell Cooperative Extension. To find more information about the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program and Cornell Cooperative Extension FMNP Outreach visit https://www.human.cornell.edu/dns/fmnp.