

## Leader of National-Service Program Has a Hunger for Results

By Eden Stiffman



FOODCORPS

Curt Ellis and five colleagues established FoodCorps to help schools play a bigger role in ensuring that kids eat healthy.

Growing up as the youngest of six kids in Oregon, Curt Ellis helped his father water the 50 tomato seedlings the family planted each summer. From a young age, he felt the sense of empowerment that came from cultivating a seedling and producing something beautiful — and edible.

As chief executive and one of six co-founders of FoodCorps, a rapidly growing, results-focused charity promoting healthy food in schools, Mr. Ellis's role as nurturer is similar, but his worldview has shifted.

Now 36, he sees his pastoral childhood as a privileged experience.

"For far too many children in our country, food is not a source of love and connection and healing, but it's a source of harm and disappointment and hunger and poor health," he says.

FoodCorps runs an AmeriCorps-funded program whose members work with local schools and grass-roots organizations. The aim is to teach kids about healthy food and nutrition through hands-on gardening and cooking while helping school districts incorporate local produce into their lunches and provide nutrition education. The charity focuses on achieving measurable changes in school food environments and student behaviors to ensure kids lead healthier lives. It also works to develop leaders in nutrition and health — many corps members continue working in related fields.

Roughly 32 million kids eat school lunches every day, and more than 12 million eat breakfast at school. But just 2 percent of children eat the government's daily recommended serving of fruits and vegetables. In recent years, obesity rates among young children have begun to decline, but diet-related illness remains a serious public-health concern. Childhood obesity disproportionately affects communities of color and low-income families, which have seen less progress in reducing rates of overweight and obese youth.

"The 100,000 public schools across the country are at the very center of what children learn about healthy food," Mr. Ellis says. But many schools are failing to provide that connection. FoodCorps hopes to change that.

### **Potential on the Table**

As a student at Yale in the late '90s and early '00s, Mr. Ellis tried to influence classmates to take an interest in where their food came from by convening conferences of farmers and food advocates, and through hijinks like releasing sheep on the Quad. Soon, as on many campuses, the conversation started to become more serious. Today, Yale has an on-campus farm, an orientation program where students volunteer on local farms, more healthy options in its dining halls, and opportunities to study food issues in ways that were not available when Mr. Ellis, a history major, was enrolled.

After graduation, Mr. Ellis moved to Iowa with his cousin, filmmaker Aaron Woolf, and a college friend, future FoodCorps co-founder Ian Cheney. Together they made the Peabody Award-winning documentary *King Corn*, which looks at the roots of America's industrialized agricultural system and obesity epidemic as Mr. Ellis and Mr. Cheney plant their own acre of corn and cook up a batch of high-fructose corn syrup.

During screenings on college campuses, Mr. Ellis met students who asked how they could help change the country's relationship to food. He didn't know where to point them. "There was just so much potential being left off the table," he says.

Mr. Ellis's vision to create a "Peace Corps for school food" began to form in 2009 when he attended a W.K. Kellogg Foundation conference on food and society in San Jose, Calif. While the conference was in session, President Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which expanded national-service programs and called for them to address specific issues, including childhood obesity. Inspired by the new law, Mr. Ellis called an informal meeting of conference attendees to discuss creating an AmeriCorps program that would work to improve the food system. About 35 people showed up — a mix of foundation staff, nonprofit leaders, and young food activists like himself.

Six of them stuck together in the years following and became FoodCorps' founders. The group has grown quickly. In 2011, it had a \$2 million budget to support its first cohort of 50 members in 10 states. Today, the budget is \$12 million, the national staff numbers 35, and 215 corps members are working at 350 schools and doing outreach to an additional 300. Another testament to the organization's success: Debra Eschmeyer, one of the original six, now directs First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! campaign and serves as a White House policy adviser on nutrition.

### **Measuring Impact**

But FoodCorps measures its success not by its alumni's achievements but by its results in schools. The charity assesses children's attitudes toward fruits and vegetables before and after they encounter the program. According to its surveys, seven of 10 students at FoodCorps schools reported trying new foods and display a more positive attitude toward produce. The organization also tracks whether schools are measurably healthier at the end of the school year by looking at factors such as whether they planted school gardens, developed healthier lunch recipes, and

redesigned lunchrooms to more effectively promote produce.

FoodCorps has partnered with the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education, and Policy at Columbia University's Teachers College to evaluate its programs. Researchers at the center are analyzing fruit and vegetable consumption in 20 schools nationwide where FoodCorps works, reviewing photos of lunch trays before and after the meal to see what students picked in lunch lines and what they ultimately consumed. They're also working to measure whether schools institutionalize new practices to ensure they remain healthy places for kids after FoodCorps leaves.

"Our goal is to get schools to a place where this work has staying power and it's not about FoodCorps showing up every single year to deliver a program," Mr. Ellis says.

### **Growing in the Future**

Looking ahead, Mr. Ellis sees lots of room for growth. Currently concentrated in urban areas, FoodCorps is working to get better at serving rural and tribal communities and is placing more emphasis on identifying standout local leaders to nurture. More than 80 percent of members are serving in the state where they lived prior to beginning service.

"We're aiming to have corps members serving in communities where they have the cultural context and community relationships that make them incredibly effective in their service and encourage them to stay in those communities in the long haul," he says. "That's what will ultimately help it become more sustainable."

While FoodCorps won't be able to reach every school, it's critical that the organization continues to expand, says Mr. Ellis.

"We did not create FoodCorps to do small acts of charity," he says. "We created FoodCorps to solve the problem of our country's broken relationship to food."

*This is the latest installment of a series, On the Rise, which profiles young people making a difference in the nonprofit world.*

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