

Can revamped 'corner stores' change the way a community eats?

A group of UCLA public health researchers and East Los Angeles high school students teamed up last summer to reinvent a dimly lit neighborhood snack shop into a more inviting source for healthy food.

They repainted the beige front a vibrant green while a market-transformation guru moved beer, chips and candy to the back of the East L.A. store and brought an expanded produce section to the front. Then the students noticed a fruit-laden jujube tree struggling to grow through a cramped hole in the cement-paved backyard of YASH La Casa Market.

"We have to save it!" the students said. So the group spent several sweltering days chipping out the pavement. The jujube tree is now the flourishing centerpiece of a new vegetable garden and a living symbol of transformation for the East Los Angeles neighborhood.

A trio of UCLA public health professors are working to change the food choices that East Los Angeles residents are making by renovating convenience stores to highlight fresh produce and involving the community in that transformation.

"The produce is already selling more," said Kulwant Songu, who runs YASH with her husband. YASH is one of two stores that the UCLA team has renovated to help market healthier food to the community. A total of four stores will be done.



Kulwant Songu and her husband, Balvinder, are the owners of YASH La Casa Market, which was renovated by a UCLA public health project to promote healthy eating in its East L.A. neighborhood.

With new, wider windows uncluttered by posters and ads to let in more sunlight, her store has undergone a healthy makeover under the expertise of market transformation pro Nathan Cheng. The double-doored entryway — previously one door was permanently locked — is now wide open and shows off fresh paint. The cash register has been moved back to draw customers inward. Beer and chip ads are history, and less-healthy impulse items have been pushed to the back of the store. A stack of cookies remains at the checkout, but vying for attention next to them is a bowl of shiny apples.



Adjunct Professor Michael Prelip heads the Corner Store Project, one of several initiatives within the UCLA-USC Center for Population Health and Health Disparities, which received \$2 million in funding over five years from the National Institutes of Health. The project began in 2010 and focuses on East L.A. in part because obesity-related chronic diseases are so disproportionately high there, Prelip explained.

"If people want to eat better, but the food options aren't there, it's really hard," said Prelip, who teaches in UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health in the Department of Community Health Sciences. "At the same time, just offering fruits and vegetables doesn't bring customers in. Not only do we need to change the physical market, we need to change the buying market. Consumers have to want to buy fresh produce, so that's why we've included a social marketing campaign."

To change attitudes, dozens of high schoolers enrolled in social-justice electives at Roosevelt High School and Esteban Torres High School's East Los Angeles Renaissance Academy spend time teaching the neighborhood about the importance of healthy eating and promoting the two stores that now sell more produce.

The students distributed flyers in neighborhoods about upcoming cooking demonstrations and other store-related events. They wore fruit costumes outside the shops and in neighborhood parades to pique customers' interest. They also teamed up with a church and elementary school located across the street from YASH to attract foot traffic from churchgoers, parents, teachers and students. The youths also taught second- and third-graders about healthy eating and container gardening.

"Now, even if they don't have a big yard at home, the kids can grow fresh herbs," said Rosa Vander Lankin, the Corner Store Project's program manager. "The parents are so excited that their kids are involved that they're supporting the store to support the kids."

The project also teamed up with several community partners to deepen community involvement. Along with high school students, the nonprofit Public Matters provided crucial assistance in creating the garden and staging cooking demonstrations. Volunteers of East Los Angeles and the community bank Pan American also participated.

"There's just amazing community support," Prelip said. "I've been doing community intervention for 25 years, and I've never seen a community embrace an intervention like East L.A. has."

That embrace has also taken a nice cross-cultural turn. Songu decided to see what the largely Latino neighborhood would think of her Indian food. So she hosted an Indian cooking demo in the shop's new Eden-like backyard garden. She even put in a small Indian grocery section in the store.



A jujube tree that had been struggling

"We didn't have that before, and our neighbors love it," Songu said. The demand from customers was strong enough for her to expand the Indian grocery aisle.

"The customers are always asking me when the next Indian cooking demonstration is going to be."



The store also now features Indian food cooking demonstrations and ingredients for the recipes.

they're renovating to four "control" stores. Anecdotally, storeowners of the two stores that have been transformed say they're selling more produce and are making at least as much money as before. But researchers will soon be looking at store receipts and doing door-to-door polling of residents of more than 1,000 houses to verify whether the Corner Store Project has indeed changed food habits and attitudes.

More importantly, they'll determine whether the results can be replicated.

"This was a huge risk for the store owners — modifying their businesses — and it's great to see that after the initial buzz the community's still excited about it," Prelip said. "We have to make it sustainable for them. If we can make this profitable, our guess is that, not only will these stores sustain it, but other stores will start selling more fruits and vegetables, too."

"Four stores can't create the whole change that this community needs, but they can contribute to a shift in what the community's knowledge and attitudes are about healthy eating."

to survive in a patch of concrete behind the store is now the centerpiece of a new vegetable garden planted by high school students with support from community groups.

In the garden where Songu holds her cooking demonstrations, the jujube tree is still the centerpiece, but now, it's surrounded by sprouting blueberries, grapes, beans, chilis, cilantro, spinach, squash and other plants.

But the changes that have resulted in the two stores go beyond this. Neighbors are also visiting the stores more often because their attitudes have changed about the markets, Prelip said.

"The owners are telling us that people are buying more produce, and their relationship with their community is changing," Prelip said. "People are really viewing these [stores] as community assets now, not just places to run in and buy some flaming-hot Cheetos. They're enjoying elevated status for being an organization that's trying to make the community healthier."

Prelip's team of researchers, including Professors Deborah Glik and Alex Ortega, are collecting sales data from all the stores and will compare the four stores