

Essential Body Herbs - Beyond The Basics.

By Lucilda Dassardo-Cooper

Identified as a “food desert” the Mattapan Community had few choices for fresh fruits and vegetables, the basic ingredients in a healthy diet. No wonder it was also labeled a “sick community,” as obesity and the resulting health imbalances were destroying the health of its citizens.

The Essential Body Herbs flagship store in Mattapan opened by proprietor Wayne Atkinson, stocks a wide variety of items for maintaining health, and encouraging preventive care. Natural herbs and vitamins, protein powders, anti-oxidants and non-allergenic toiletries are items now available in the community. Natural herbs for managing depression, Alzheimer’s, weight loss, cancer care, arthritis, fibroid tumors and drug addictions are among many of the offerings now available in the Mattapan Community through Essential Body Herbs, as well as a variety of vitamins and supplements for optimal health.

As a young man, Wayne was extremely influenced by his father’s fight with cancer, and his mother’s focus on supporting his battle for health with natural herbs in addition to chemotherapy and radiation. As he tells the story, his father lived an additional 20 years, after many of his co-patients with cancer had passed away. This early successful fight for life with herbal options made a long-lasting impression on a growing child.

Although trained as an herbalist, his mother became a naturopath and offered her skills and expertise to the community. In this atmosphere of herbal medicine and healing, Wayne absorbed the lessons of natural health care, learned about the various herbs and vitamins and their uses and effect on the body. Although he made other career choices, he eventually returned to his mother’s crusade of maintaining health nature’s way.

Finally, realizing he would help more people to maximum health with a public presence, he opened his flagship store in Mattapan. He then expanded to Codman Square in Dorchester and the Dudley area in Roxbury; three really needy communities where the living is hard, health disparities are the norm and healthy fixings for the family dinner are pricey and difficult to find in the absence of a full service supermarket.

In the years since his brave public foray, Wayne has seen a marked change in public response to his offerings. He describes a more informed clientele: familiar with herbal supplements and dissatisfied with the pharmacological focus of current medical practice. Seeking to mitigate the side effects and take charge of their own health, his customers now focus on natural alternatives.

Continuing to push the boundaries, he plans to offer the community's first juice bar at the larger Roxbury location. In addition, he is working on stocking some fresh fruits and vegetables that the Healthy on the Block initiative advocates for corner stores, to his large selection of protein powders and other healthy products. This may also be the only place in all three communities to find such items as non-allergenic body care products.

Essential Body Herbs is now part of the Healthy on the Block Initiative (HOB), a project of the Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition (MFFC). The aim of HOB is to get more corner stores to carry healthy food items from which local families can make delicious and nutritious meals. Cassandra Cato-Louis serves as the coordinator of the Healthy on the Block/Mattapan project and receives invaluable guidance and support from the Boston Public Health commission's Javier Gutierrez. Her team consists of MFFC members Vickey Siggers, Lucilda Dassardo-Cooper, and Onyinyechi Onwuka, among others.

As part of the HOB project, Healthy Family Fun Fridays were organized at the Mattahunt/Wheelock Community Center, to inform citizens of the links between nutrition, physical activity and health. These Intergenerational events catered by local chefs, enabled participation of all ages. Materials translated into Spanish and Haitian Creole allowed cultural and ethnic diversity. The Vigorous Youth, the youth arm of the MFFC, along with support from the Boston Collaborative Get Fresh Crew, encouraged the active participation of young people in the health and wellness of their community.

The Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition was co-founded by Chairperson Vivien Morris with other concerned partners and citizens in 2006 in response to the health inequities of the Mattapan area. The MFFC has a significant focus on making healthy and affordable food more available and physical fitness a priority. Other projects of MFFC aimed at improving access to healthy foods include the Mattapan Farmers Market, Mattapan Mobile Farm Stand, gardening promotion and nutrition education activities.

Other partners in this initiative include Mama Supermarket, 1178 Blue Hill Ave. Here, fresh fruits and vegetables are available - many from the Caribbean, in response to the community they serve. Mattapan Square Mobil, 1156 Blue Hill Ave offers healthy options including fruits for quick snacks and lunch. World's Best Supermarket, 645 River Street already has a clientele from near and far for its meat alternative products and now offer fresh fruits and vegetables.

The opening of the Mattapan Community Health Center marks an important milestone in the effort to make health a priority in the lives of Mattapan citizens. Concurrent with this initiative, Essential Body Herbs Store has been quietly taking the health and wellness focus to new dimensions for this community.

Watch for Essential Body Herbs information table at the Mattapan Farmers Market this summer. Please visit the Essential Body Herbs at 1282 Blue Hill Ave. in Mattapan

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