From Pantry to Prevention

Pitt students bring nutrition education, and a whole lot more, to Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood.

■ BY JUNIOR GONZALEZ

On Wednesday mornings this past spring, something different was happening at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA. The fitness classes upstairs had just wrapped up, and as members filtered downstairs, they were met with the aroma of freshly cooked sweet potatoes, a friendly face at the front of the room, and a recipe card waiting on each seat.

For seven weeks, the community room at the Homewood Y became a classroom of sorts, led by three graduate students from the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Together, they ran Pantry to Prevention, a weekly nutrition education and cooking demonstration program designed, built, and funded almost entirely by themselves.

"Being able to promote health through conversation, collaboration with my team, and interaction with the Homewood community was honestly such an amazing experience," said Simon Rocktashel, a master's student in clinical exercise physiology. "I'm super proud to be part of Pantry to Prevention."

Simon was joined by classmates Caylee Mackey, also studying clinical exercise physiology, and Ameya Deshpande, a MS in Health and Wellness Management student. The small-but-mighty group worked the entire academic year together to make the program a reality.



Meeting a Community Need

The program grew out of a two-semester course sequence taught by clinical instructor Anne Hays. In the fall, students learned the theory and mechanics of health program planning—conducting needs assessments, building budgets, and developing a marketing plan. In the spring, they implemented what they built. Hays launched the class in 2021, and each year, the students pick something new.

"It's never the same class twice," Hays said. "The beginning parts are always the same—find the organization, do a needs analysis, brainstorm. But the end products are so vastly different."

The course has been paired with the Homewood-Brushton YMCA since the start, a partnership Hays developed through Pitt's community engagement center.

She says the Y is an ideal collaborator: open, gracious, and genuinely invested in student learning and meeting community needs.

In previous years, students' projects centered on other aspects of health, such as physical activity. This year, after pouring through community health data, CDC census figures, and the Homewood Comprehensive Community Plan, the student trio landed on nutrition as their focus.

The data pointed to elevated rates of obesity and diabetes in the neighborhood, and the students noticed something else too: a Giant Eagle mobile market parked outside the Y every Wednesday, offering 50% off fresh produce to anyone who wanted it.

"There's a food desert situation in Homewood," Hays explained. "There's not a great place for somebody who doesn't have a car to buy groceries. And that's why the Giant Eagle food truck got started, to try and address that." The students saw an opportunity to bridge education and access in the same room, on the same morning, and "Pantry to Prevention" was the result.

Each session followed a consistent structure. Students would begin with a recap of the previous week's goals, move through an icebreaker discussion question tied to the day's topic, and draw a raffle winner. Participants who made a purchase at the mobile market after each session were entered to win a Giant Eagle gift card. Then came the main event: a 10-to-15-minute lesson, followed by a live cooking demonstration.

Across seven weeks, the topics covered heart health, smart grocery shopping, macronutrients, mindful eating, and cultural approaches to nutrition.

The recipes matched the lessons—Mackey made a beet hummus dip during heart health week (complete with a Valentine's Day theme and stress ball giveaways shaped like little hearts); Rocktashel demonstrated an easy chicken salad recipe during a session on macronutrients; and Deshpande led a mindful eating class centered on a customizable trail mix.

"Mindful eating is more of a lifestyle," Deshpande said. "It's about being aware of what you're actually putting into your body—slowing down, being intentional, rather than mindlessly snacking while watching TV.

"I wasn't introducing a new diet," Deshpande added. "I was trying to restructure the way people think about food."

Photography by Junior Gonzalez

A Culturally Aware Approach to Nutrition

One session that stood out featured a guest chef from the Community Liver Alliance, one of the program's sponsors. The chef, who had lost significant weight and managed a diabetes diagnosis through overhauling his diet, cooked sweet potatoes in a cast iron skillet and spoke candidly about his father's death from heart disease. He shared his love for Black cuisine and comfort food, noting that making some simple changes can go a long way. The room, according to Talia Gasbarro, the Homewood Y's healthy living coordinator, was full.

"I think the fact that you all had somebody that looked like them gave them reassurance," Gasbarro said. "And when they could see a different way to cook something they're already eating—that was a good takeaway."

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> **Ameya Deshpande, a MS in Health and Wellness Management student**

At the end of each session, participants filled out a brief exit survey, answering what one thing they took away from the day, and whether they felt safe and included. Some also headed outside to the mobile market, recipe card in hand, to shop for ingredients they'd just seen come together in the cooking demo.

By the time the program ended in late March, 40 people had attended at least one session. The audience skewed older, and many were existing Y members whose fitness classes had let out just before the program started.

However, they were, by every account, eager to engage.

"I honestly was surprised to see how receptive they were," Deshpande said. "They came up with their own ideas on how to restructure their diets, on the spot. It wasn't like we were professors just lecturing content. We were having discussions. And a lot of them just came up with stuff and were super energized about it." Gasbarro saw it from the other side of the room. She





recalled one Y member in particular—someone whom she knew was experiencing food insecurity—who attended multiple sessions.

Gasbarro also reflected on a dimension the students intentionally built into their curriculum: a lesson about cultural approaches to nutrition. In a community where cooking traditions run deep, and where much of the food culture has roots in survival and resilience, the students didn't try to prescribe a wholesale overhaul. They offered perspective.

"You don't have to stick to traditional diet advice," Deshpande said. "You can have your culture, have your tradition and your way of preparing things, and make it sustainable and healthy."

Experiential Learning Leads to Results

The program's outcome data told an encouraging story. Ninety-six percent of participants reported learning at least one new thing—surpassing the students' goal of 90%. Attendance and food samples distribution grew week over week, starting modestly and peaking at 24 samples distributed in the final session. Nearly 70% of post-program survey respondents reported high levels of confidence in healthy cooking skills.

The students funded the program on a lean budget: $500 from the School of Education and $500 from the Community Liver Alliance, supplemented by in-kind produce donations from the Giant Eagle mobile market and gift cards the students secured through old-fashioned canvassing.

"They wanted more, so they went and knocked on Giant Eagle's doors," Hays said. "Endless stops, begging for gift cards, walking around the community, into the libraries, and taking their weekends to do that."

For the three students who ran Pantry to Prevention, the experience helped them realize the impact of their work.

Mackey, a former Division I distance runner who has long understood the link between nutrition and performance, found her sense of purpose renewed. "By seeing participants engage with the material and take ownership of their health reminded me of why this work matters," she said.

Rocktashel reflected on the program's reach. "When communities are given the right tools, knowledge, and access, meaningful change can follow," he said.

And Deshpande, who wants to eventually become a director at a health and wellness facility—ideally serving underrepresented communities—said the experience confirmed something.

"We were happy to at least impact one person," he said. "But I think we impacted a lot more than that." ■