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Keeping a promise

Chicoan brings healthful eating and living to underserved Chico and Oroville neighborhoods

By [Christine G.K. LaPado](#)

“Kids used to run and play,” observed Richard Roth, an energetic 57-year-old whose bright eyes twinkle behind wire-rimmed glasses. “Now they just waddle and Game Boy. ... If you look at Saturday cartoons, they’re selling garbage [food on the commercials] to 3-year-olds. ... Diet makes a huge difference in being motivated—you feel better, so you do more.”

Fifty percent of all kids in the United States are overweight, Roth noted, and 25 percent of children of color show signs of juvenile-onset diabetes, which can be prevented by regular physical exercise and a diet focusing on fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains.

“Childhood diabetes was unheard of 40 to 50 years ago,” he said. “It was called ‘adult-onset diabetes.’ We’ve brought it down into the fifth grade. It’s clear that we are killing our kids.”

Roth, a self-described “nutrition-and-exercise advocate,” talked recently over a green salad at Café Flo about his passionately held views, and some of the solutions he is offering as organizer of the weekly Chapmantown Food & Fitness Festival and Southside’s Fire House Certified Farmers Market in Oroville.

It’s easy to get Roth to speak about what he sees



MAN WITH THE PLAN

Richard Roth, the brains behind the Chapmantown Food & Fitness Festival in Chico (pictured, at Floyd Rogers’ stall) and Southside’s Fire House Certified Farmers Market in Oroville, keeps the local market rolling, rain or shine.

Photo by Meredith J. Cooper

Off to market:

Chapmantown Food & Fitness Festival takes place Fridays, 2-6 p.m., in Chapman Elementary School’s parking lot at the end of East 16th Street. Electronic benefit transfer cards (food stamps) accepted.

as a pressing need for Americans—especially those of low-income and special needs, and children in particular—to improve the quality of the food they eat and increase the amount of exercise they get.

Though his “day job” is groundskeeper/maintenance man at Chico Community Children’s Center—a nonprofit organization near the Silver Dollar Fairgrounds serving at-risk and low-income kids from 6 months old to fifth grade—Roth devotes much of his time to working via his educational nonprofit organization cChaos (Collaboratively Creating Health Access Opportunities and Services) to bring nutritious food and healthful habits to those who need them most.

The Southside Fire House Certified Farmers Market in Oroville is open Thursdays, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., at 3515 Myers St.

In Chico, Richard Roth is looking for additional farmers to sell produce; stall spaces are free. For more information, e-mail richard@cchaos.org or visit www.cchaos.org.

In February, he was given the Healthy Hero Award by the Sierra Cascade Region branch of Network for a Healthy California for his work as founding director of cChaos, and for creating farmers markets in underserved Chico and Oroville neighborhoods. He also received a similar award, on the statewide level—Champion for Change Award—from Network for a Healthy California.



EBT BOUNTY

People receiving public assistance for food can use their electronic benefit transfer cards to buy fresh produce in the Chapman neighborhood.

Photo by Meredith J. Cooper

Access to fresh, healthful food in low-income neighborhoods dominated by convenience stores hawking sodas, beer and packaged, processed junk food is often difficult to come by, Roth points out, and physical education in the schools has been cut to a bare minimum due to budget restraints. Add to that the tendency for parents to keep their children indoors in such neighborhoods, which are often seen as more dangerous than other areas, and you have a recipe for health disaster.

The Chapmantown Food & Fitness Festival—part farmers market, part crafts fair, part health-education fair—began in early October and takes place every Friday afternoon in the parking lot across the street from Chapman Elementary School, in the Chapman neighborhood.

To Roth’s knowledge, the Chapmantown and Southside Oroville markets are the only farmers markets north of Sacramento that accept EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards—more commonly known as food stamps—as payment.

Roth, a former long-time organic farmer who has a bachelor’s degree in plant and soil science, worked as a project manager in Oroville for nonprofit agency Caminar, which serves adults with mental-health, physical and developmental disabilities, before going to work at Chico Community Children’s Center. He recalled noticing that his mentally ill and disabled clients were often “eating garbage; spending much of their spare money at the nearby convenience store on cheese pizza,

sodas and candy bars. In the three years [that I worked there], every month someone died, always from nutrition-related diseases: gross obesity, diabetes, heart disease.”

His experience with these clients, whose nearest access to food in their low-income neighborhoods was the corner convenience store, prompted Roth to promise himself that he would find a way to make fresh produce and health education easily accessible to overlooked neighborhoods such as Chapmantown.

Roth proudly points out that besides featuring local farmers offering fresh, organic produce, and crafts made by local artisans, the Food & Fitness Festival offers free blood-pressure readings and BMI (body mass index) calculations provided by Chico State nursing students; a produce-swap table where people can exchange seeds, excess produce and plants; and a reconditioned bicycle vendor, Sensible Cyclery, offering reasonably priced bikes reconditioned by Caminar clients.

Due soon at future Food & Fitness Festivals are kinesiology students from Chico State who will perform organized physical activities “with kids, adults, even the vendors. We’re not just trying to reach the customer; we’re trying to improve everybody’s health,” Roth said.

Partnering organization OPT for Fit Kids has offered free cooking classes every Friday in the Chapman-Mulberry Neighborhood Building adjacent to the parking lot and the market. The popular sessions focus on teaching parents about healthful eating with the foods found at the market, and are expected to resume next school year.

“I think it’s important that [these farmers markets] be year-round,” Roth said. “One thing that bugged me about other farmers markets is that they were seasonal, or if there’s a little water, they’ll cancel. It makes it hard for the farmers and for the customers. Rain or shine, we’ll be there.”

As for the name of his organization: “ ‘Chaos’ was taken,” offered Roth, an avid reader of books on quantum physics and chaos theory. “ ‘cChaos’ was the first Web site available, and it seemed to fit. That’s what farmers markets kind of are; they’re chaos. And that’s what people’s lives are—chaos—especially if they’re physically disabled.

“But, within chaos, there are these patterns that we can recognize as being healthy. If we can focus on amplifying these patterns, we can improve our lives.”