

HealthyFam bringing families back to dinner table

by Ian Holroyd

Metroland West Media

Julia Hanna has a vision.

In that vision, Canadian families are once again crowding around the dinner table, enjoying delicious, healthy food together while discussing the day's events.

The table, lovingly draped in a crisp cloth, is covered with steaming bowls of ravioli, green salads and baskets of fresh-baked bread just like nonna used to make.

Family members scoop portions of food vigorously onto their plates as they talk to one another across the table. The conversation often gets heated, but is always layered with love, understanding and respect.

Hanna believes somewhere in our society's evolution we lost our way when it comes to eating — and eating together. Quality food and time-honoured traditions were traded for convenience and time-saving measures.

Sharing a meal with family was replaced with grabbing a grease-stained bag of food on the run. The kitchen was abandoned and the family dialogue stopped.

There is a crisis in North America when it comes to our food, suggests Hanna, a 56-year-old chef and restaurateur.

"The problem is all the women left the kitchen but nobody went back in," she said with a smile, sitting in a booth at Ristorante Julia, her restaurant



The Hanna family — Matthew (from left), Julia, J.P. and Alex — gather in the kitchen to enjoy a piping hot peach crisp fresh out of the oven. | photo by Nikki Wesley — Oakville Beaver (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog)

in downtown Oakville. She also owns Ritorno, an Italian restaurant at Dundas Street and Trafalgar Road.

"Convenience foods and processed foods have become a staple in our diet," she said. "And of course now the harmful long-term effects of that have come into plain and clear view that nobody can dispute any longer."

In an effort to rediscover a healthy relationship with food and reverse the trends of eating for convenience sake, Hanna is introducing a

new initiative, HealthyFam, scheduled to launch this September.

HealthyFam is actually the expansion of an earlier program she established called Kids Culinary Community (KCC), a free, three-session food-and-cooking education program designed for youths.

"It was simple logic. We thought let's go to the very beginning. Let's get children before they develop those habits. Let's give them at least the knowledge base to work with," said Hanna of

the philosophy behind KCC.

Since it was founded in 2009, KCC has had more than 500 participants go through the program and graduate. Hanna said she noticed the adult mentors who accompanied the young chefs were also soaking up the information at the sessions.

"We became keenly aware that they, too, didn't have those skills and they were hungry for it," she said. "Then I started looking at seniors who live alone they are often isolated," she said. "If you really believe in the philosophy that food brings people together, someone who lives alone and is elderly, they're not cooking for themselves."

Now, along with KCC, the HealthyFam program will also consist of Seniors Culinary Community as well as Family Culinary Community. "We're taking lessons learned from KCC and applying them to the whole family," said Hanna.

Like KCC, HealthyFam programs will include three sessions of instruction and will be held in the Longo's Lofts — nine fully-equipped educational kitchens located in Longo's grocery stores — across the GTA, as well as in off-site locations.

HealthyFam is a non-profit organization that teaches people the value of eating right, staying fit and connecting with each other on a regular basis to build a strong family foundation.

Sponsors who make HealthyFam possible include Longo's, Trinison Management Corp.,

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