

Green Living Column

Perk Up Your Ears: Two Programs Offer New Harmonies and Languages at our Farmers' Markets



By Lucinda Kurtz

Not only will the aromas of fresh fruits and vegetables tantalize us and the beauty of fresh produce delight our eyes, but now two new programs will also please our ears this summer at the farmers' markets in our local community. The Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra's program "A Taste of Music" will bring musicians to the markets, and the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market iPad Translation program will translate key phrases into Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish to better serve the expanding population of shoppers from different cultural backgrounds. Both of these programs aim to reach families and young people who receive federal assistance on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP — formerly known as food stamps) and who take advantage of Fair Food Network's Double Up Food Bucks program.

Fair Food Network is a national nonprofit organization based in Ann Arbor, founded on the belief that vibrant local food systems can create health and economic opportunity for all. Its Double Up Food Bucks program provides low-income shoppers who receive SNAP benefits with a one-to-one match up to \$20 per market day to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables at participating farmers' markets. Double Up demonstrates how we can meet the immediate food needs of low-income Americans in ways that boost healthy eating, support farmers, and stimulate economic activity.

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Due to the success of the Double Up program in bringing more than \$353,286 in extra spending money to customers at participating Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti farmers' markets since 2010, more people who use SNAP benefits are shopping at farmers' markets, diversifying the customer base with shoppers who have limited English proficiency. To give you a sense of the new populations available to utilize these assistance programs now that EBT (electronic benefit transfer) transactions and the SNAP program have moved into farmers' markets, in Washtenaw County, over 35,000 individuals receive SNAP — 14,196 of whom are children. Since 2010, statewide in Michigan, 182,774 Double Up customers purchased healthy, fresh local produce at farmers' markets. About 20 percent were first-time market customers.

The influx of new and different shoppers of widely different ages and cultural and language backgrounds has stimulated ideas for innovation from market personnel. In 2013, the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market received a Customer Service Grant from the City of Ann Arbor, enabling the purchase of an iPad with translation applications to improve the communication between market staff and their customers.

It was Sarah DeWitt, market manager, and her assistant, Carrie DeWitt, who initiated the translation program. Sarah enthusiastically commented: "The program is stretching our idea of customer service." They wanted to provide better information and more satisfying interactions with market visitors. The translation application allows staff members to interact one-to-one with customers and offer details about the Double Up program. A feedback log tracks how many people they are communicating with, in what languages, and the type of questions customers are asking. This enables staff to learn basic greetings, answer frequently asked questions, and help community members feel more comfortable when they visit the markets.

Staff members ask all customers using the Double Up program two questions: Is this your first time using your Bridge Card (EBT) at this market? Is the Double Up program one of the reasons you are visiting the market today? These questions are asked of all customers statewide and help Fair Food Network collect the valuable data that demonstrate how this model program can have an impact not only on the physical health of the shopper but also on the economic wellbeing of the community. With the addition of the iPad, these questions



**"The program is stretching our idea of customer service."
— Sarah DeWitt, Ann Arbor Farmers' Market Manager**

are being translated into Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish, and are available to shoppers in laminated signs.

The success of this translation pilot could lead to its use in other Ann Arbor Parks situations. The goodwill the program generates more than pays for itself in community cohesiveness — a priceless commodity Ann Arbor seems very able to cultivate through its positive attitude, service orientation, and attention to the needs of diverse populations.

"A Taste of Music: The Ann Arbor Symphony Goes to the Farmers' Market" is yet another innovative program that illustrates the creativity and outreach of our local institutions. Fair Food Network was pleased to write a letter of support to the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan on behalf of this highly complementary program. With a generous grant from the Foundation, A2SO will be presenting two popular components of its Education and Outreach programming — chamber concerts and the Instrument Petting Zoo — each summer for three years.

Even more exciting for our children is the Instrument Petting Zoo, where kids can play instruments of all kinds and sizes.

"A Taste of Music" will offer 12 free outdoor concerts at six area markets: Ann Arbor Farmers' Market; Ann Arbor West; Ypsilanti; Howell; Chelsea; and South Lyon. The ensembles will include trios, quartets, and other combinations of professional musicians who have also gone out to schools, libraries, retirement centers, and other community locales.

Even more exciting for our children is the Instrument Petting Zoo, where kids can play instruments of all kinds and sizes. "Zookeepers" will be available to help children hold and experiment with the appropriate size of instrument they may want to touch and play. This program has been successful in libraries, shopping malls, daycare centers, and other venues that service a wide range of people from different cultural and economic backgrounds.

Furthering its commitment to the community, A2SO will also distribute vouchers to up to 700 SNAP/Double Up shoppers for free access to Ann Arbor Symphony Orchestra concerts, bringing live symphony music to a new audience and a new generation of young people.

"A Taste of Music" hopes to illustrate how live symphony music can be an integral part of our lives, just as Fair Food Network's Double Up Food Bucks program and the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market Translation project help a new population of shoppers make healthy, fresh local fruits and vegetables an integral part of their lives. What better place to bring these goals together than at our local farmers' markets where the sounds, smells, and sights converge in perfect harmony.

Lucinda Kurtz, M.A., is a Communications Specialist at Fair Food Network in Ann Arbor. She is also a Brennan Healing Science Practitioner and combines her belief in the importance of healthy food for a healthy life with her commitment to providing access to healthy food for all people. For more information about Fair Food Network, visit www.fairfoodnetwork.org or call (734) 213-3999.