Throughout the semester, we have broadened our perspectives about what is considered to be “good” or “healthy” food and explored the complexities of food access and choice. Each member of the class came into the project with a unique perspective, which along with our course text, enriched discussion in the classroom and helped us to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives in our research. We were particularly interested in gender, race, and class.

Methods

Research Question:

What are the food needs of residents living in the Geneva Courtyard Apartments?

In order to gain an understanding of residents’ food needs we explored the area and got to know the community in the following ways:

• Participant Observation—As a group, we spent approximately 80 combined hours at the Courtyard Apartments, in each of these locations, we immersed ourselves in the local context and wrote field notes detailing our experiences. We used this method in order to understand daily goings-on and gain insight into food needs, habits, and accessibility.

• Surveys—The community food survey was designed to identify whether there were any existing food concerns within the community and what those concerns were. We also hoped to gain a general understanding of the food habits and preferences of the community and to gain an understanding of residents’ food needs and concerns. In total we interviewed thirteen informants, including residents of the Geneva Courtyard apartments and community leaders. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded thematically. They yielded knowledge on the food-related problems in the community and also area connections and solutions.

• Mapping—Background maps were made to develop a better sense of the area with which we were interacting. Our maps incorporate various census data from online databases, as well as other information that we collected ourselves, which are displayed on three different maps. The maps allow us to compare data visually in order to illustrate information about economic inequality, transportation, and food access in the broader Geneva community.

Food, Feminism, and Health (WMST 305) Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Findings and Analysis:

The Complexity of Access

Cost:

“It is always, you have to pay for this. pay for that, but the economy now is bad that people just can’t afford anything. So be to you expect people to eat healthy, if the price of everything is going up?— Courtyard Resident, Black Female

Analysis: Access was an issue for many residents in regard to the affordability of healthy foods. Many residents expressed frustration about not being able to afford the foods they needed or wanted — especially fresh produce.

Location and Transportation:

“We need a grocery store down this way.” — Courtyard Resident, Black Male

“[I am trying to get there, it’s trying to get home with all the stuff]. — Courtyard Resident, Female, White-Hispanic

Analysis: Residents mentioned having difficulty both getting to grocery stores easily and transporting their groceries home. A key informant echoed this sentiment when describing his experience with public transit. Aside from a sub-shop, none of Geneva’s food marts and grocery stores are within reasonable walking distance.

Time:

“…People would look at me for my size, and say that I ate, but that wasn’t the thing… What I ate was at the wrong time… I was a night eater because of my years of working; I worked in the factory and I would work at 5:30 [p.m.]. In the daytime I slept. At night, I was up, so that’s where I ate my meals… — Courtyard Resident, Black Female

Analysis: Time is another aspect of access—in this case this woman worked a night shift making it difficult to a) have time to prepare meals and b) eat at the times that she considered to be the healthiest for her body.

Culture:

“Era mas facil ser saludable en Puerto Rico porque nosotros teniamos un Jardin. Ca comida alla no tenia pesticidas y quimicas. Ahora mirame, era mas saludable então.” — Courtyard Resident, Puerto Rican Female

Translation: “It was easier to be healthy in Puerto Rico because I ate what I planted. I had a garden in my backyard… There were no pesticides or chemicals. I was healthier before, now look at me, I’m fat!”

Analysis: Cultural barriers often inhibit people from accessing the foods they want to eat. This woman is unable to attain the foods she wants because the place where she is living does not support her cultural food needs, including both production and consumption practices.

Viceral:

“[Healthy eating is important] because you don’t have to worry about getting [unhealthy eating]— you won’t fat, you won’t gain weight, it will make you feel better.” — Courtyard Resident, Black Female

Analysis: This quote demonstrates how people actually have visceral connections to food—that is, bodily feelings and emotional attachments to particular foods. Certain foods can make people feel happy, sad, etc., and therefore, access to these foods is crucial for our well-being.

The Cornucopia of Food Politics: Finding a Real Solution for a Complex Problem

The Geneva Courtyard Apartments are part of a living community administered by the Geneva Housing Authority. The mission of this organization is to “improve the quality life for the Geneva community specifically, its lower income residents” (Geneva Housing Authority brochure). This facility includes 224 units and is located adjacent to a childcare center and one of Geneva’s Boys and Girls Clubs — this serves elementary school children. Also on the premises are a library, computer center, pavilion, playground, volleyball courts, a basketball court, community room, and football field.

When describing the residents, a key informant stated:

…the Courtyard Apartments community is not unlike any other community in the city of Geneva — you have a whole range of people with different interests… you do have more of an ethnic and racial mix at that development, but you have employed, unemployed – across the board – elderly all the way down to very young kids; some people that definitely are struggling and need some assistance.

Potential Solutions

What community members and key informants said:

* “In a perfect world we would have a shuttle bus…” — Key Informant, White Female
* “Well I think having some kind of cooking classes again would help.” — Key Informant, White Male
* “We need a grocery store down this way.” — Resident, Black Male
* “…[We could use a] food co-op type setup…[the community room] could be a food distribution location…something that may work…” — Key Informant, White Male

This could translate into…

• Shuttle Bus (to Community Lunch Program, Grocery Stores)
• Cleaner Grocery Store
• Nutrition Class/Group
• Nutrition forum
• Community Garden

Learning Outcomes

How did our engagement with “Nurdwork” in the Geneva community contribute to our learning as scholars and activists?

LEARNING HOW TO NAVIGATE THE RESEARCH PROCESS: We learned that…

• It is difficult to organize and execute a survey and interviews. It takes a lot of coordination!
• We can use mapping software like ArcGIS in order to collect important background data on our area of study.

ATTENDING TO RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND ETHICS: We learned that…

• The IRB process, though quite long and involved, is a crucial component of protecting our research participants and gaining confidentiality.
• Communication in field work is tricky, especially when talking about food; it is important to be able to navigate differences in economic standing, educational background, and cultural contexts moving.
• Active researcher involvement within the community is important for assessing the needs of the community as a whole. Building rapport with community members is crucial for getting them to share their perspectives on your research topic.

RECONCILING REAL LIFE COMPLEXITIES: We learned that…

• There is more to obesity than eating too much and exercising too little; we have to understand obesity within its larger social, economic context and race/cultural components.
• There are no easy answers to the problems of the food system; we have to be able to work through real-world complexity and contradictions.
• Healthy eating is not just an individual choice: not everyone has the ability to make the decisions that they would like to make in regard to the food that they eat and food others.

IMAGINING OUR ACADEMIC ACTIVITY FUTURES: We learned that…

• We need to add food production (and work related); as well as food distribution and consumption, in our ongoing struggles for food justice.
• Much more needs to be done in regard to food education; but, we have to be sure to engage the world in a way that does not reinforce hierarchy.

Thank you all of the residents and community leaders who were willing to participate in our surveys and interviews, and to the Boys and Girls Club, Community Lunch Program, and Geneva Housing Authority for helping us achieve our real food, health, access, and social justice interests. Additional gratitude goes to CTL and CCESL for making this project possible.

Figure 1: ‘The Community Room’ located within the Geneva Courtyard Apartment Complex

Figure 2: ‘The Basketball court and building units of the Geneva Courtyard apartment complex’