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Who said eating isn't fun!?

Changing the nation's health epidemic through Play (and a grower and a team of lunch ladies)

YUMA, ARIZONA- Yuma has long been known as the vegetable capital of the world. With the nation's health epidemic in the daily news, it is becoming more evident that if consumers would eat more of what Yuma is growing, child obesity and alarming health statistics could change for the better.

Does it take an army of doctors, experts and government experts to solve this national epidemic? Not if one local grower has anything to say about it.

Vic Smith, owner of JVSmith Companies in Yuma, Arizona is partnering with the owners of Limelight Creative Group to entice local elementary kids to eat healthier using an innovative approach and unusual allies....the lunch ladies and a paper plate.

But, not just any plate. The POWER PLAY'te is a paper plate designed to encourage children to fill ½ their plate with fresh fruits and vegetables. It resembles the USDA's *Choose My Plate* design but includes illustrative, loveable characters and bright colors that introduce fun into eating healthy.

The tagline "Grow on, PLAY with your food!" encourages kids to play with their food by "driving" their fresh broccoli into the dairy depot to add ranch dressing. Or, "partnering up with peanut butter" to make the banana more appealing. "The playful part of the program and the fact that it is taking place in our local schools is what we believe will set it apart from other marketing campaigns designed to help kids make better choices," he added.

The POWER PLAY'te program was designed and created by Kristan Sheppard and Susan Sternitzke of Limelight Creative Group. Having five children of their own, their kids are the official focus group of this project. "I've always found that if I can make a meal fun, they will eat what I want them to eat without them even thinking about whether it's good for them or not," stated Sternitzke. "And, the repetitiveness of introducing those foods means they will choose them over something like a donut because they have learned to like them."

The POW'er PLAY'te program consists of the PLAY'tes as well as a "crop of the week" educational program geared to encourage teachers to introduce kids to the website

www.powerplayte.com. The program will be unveiled September 12, 2012 in Yuma elementary schools. Every elementary school in Yuma School District One and Crane Elementary School District will serve lunch on the PLAY'tes once per week.

"JVSmith Companies has generously agreed to fund the entire Yuma project so that every child will eat on the PLAY'tes in schools," Sheppard said. "The support that Vic Smith has shown for this project is overwhelming. When we first approached him with this idea, he didn't hesitate and offered to completely fund the project to improve the health of Yuma kids."

Smith is a local grower specializing in lettuce varieties, green onions, leafy greens and organic produce. "I care deeply about the future of children and the incredible challenges they are going to be facing if they don't change their eating habits," stated Smith, who is also the Chairman of the Board of the Yuma Regional Medical Center.

The philosophy of the POW'er PLAY'te program is.. don't try to educate them every time they pick up a fork. "Children learn better through play. The PLAY'te is designed for play and before you know it, they are trying something new that they thought they didn't like," added Kristan Sheppard, a former first grade teacher.

Karen Johnson, past President of the School Nutrition Association is the Director of Yuma School District One's Child Nutrition Programs. "I am thrilled to be a part of this program that I believe could eventually be in every elementary school in the country. Our staff is on board to help!" She believes the POWER PLAY'te project couldn't come at a better time. The USDA has made changes to the meal pattern this year, and we will be putting more fruits and veggies on the student's plates. "The timing couldn't be more perfect to join forces with POWER PLAY'tes to make it fun and to teach students that good nutrition includes fruits and vegetables. We believe in this program and hope that the PLAY'te will encourage them throughout the year to try something they wouldn't have tried before."

Jane Johnson, School Nutrition Director of Crane Elementary District agrees, "The fact that our nutrition staff is being provided fun, logoed t-shirts on the POWER PLAY'te day will help empower our team to take ownership and encourage the kids to eat what is on their PLAY'te.

The marketing team, along with Smith went to the Produce Marketing Association's annual convention in July to meet with industry leaders to garner support to determine if this project could be introduced into other communities with the support of the agriculture community. Smith concluded "we believe the fresh produce industry will embrace this innovative approach and believe in the Power of the PLAY'te and I'm so proud to say it is starting in Yuma with our support." Want more information? Visit www.limelightcreativegroup.com or call Sheppard at 928-246-9108 or Sternitzke at 928-246-9255.

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