

Rose Shin: Hi, welcome everyone. My name is Rose Shin and I am here with Raihanna Ali. We are going to speak to you further about our Deerfield Beach Florida project. We are so excited to have you here. We can't wait to share some more information with you and answer any questions that you might have. That being said, please use the Q&A section to ask your questions and we will get them live and answer them to the best of our abilities. Thank you. I want to introduce you all to Rahanna who is a very integral part of our project. I'm not sure what we would do without you, Rahanna. She is a parent, a board member, a community member. I will let her speak more about who she is. Well, I will tell you how wonderful she is because I think she's probably very modest, but she can tell us more about herself and her participation with this project.

Raihanna Ali: Hi everyone. Thank you, Rose. My name is Rahanna Ali. As Rose said, I am a parent. I'm married and a parent of four children. They span the elementary, middle and high school. I think when we first came to Deerfield Beach, the easiest thing to learn about the whole system and the school was just to get involved as a volunteer. And that's how I started with everything. I got involved at the elementary. Then my kids got older and then I headed over to middle school. That is where we started with middle school and I got involved with FLIPANY and our community board and with the youth advisory board and all the little projects we started until we've reached where we are now with our food distribution. Because we had to pivot because of COVID as did everybody else.

Rose Shin: That's right. So when you were with us, so we caught you at middle school so you're on your track through the school system. And then can you tell us a little bit about what happened at the middle school and how you got interested in what we were working with?

Raihanna Ali: At the middle school, when my daughter started in sixth grade, I think sixth graders at the time in Broward County when they start the BMI screening.

Rose Shin: Which is body mass index so it tells you the body fat.

Raihanna Ali: Yes. So they started that. This principal was very concerned because generally for that whole entire sixth grade class at the time, it was very high within the county. She was a bit concerned and she called in FLIPANY. She's like, "How can we address this? I want to do something. I don't want these children to continue complete middle school and still have this problem or it continues on and they have serious health problems later in life." So she called in FLIPANY. I think FLIPANY to have a plan in terms of addressing nutrition and physical activity with the students. I think FLIPANY had started the Cooking Matters at the school. They started Soccer for Success. These are very popular to this day, students who've gone through this program, even if at high school, they all remembered.

Everybody had a taste, either they did the Cooking Matters or they did the Soccer for Success. Everybody did something and had a little taste and everybody remembers it fondly. But at the time, FLIPANY started that and then I think we got a grant to help improve the education and physical activity at the school. Part of that grant was to form a parent advisory community group with members from the school, parents, community members, just to see how best we can address the problem and help improve it. And also in a fun way, to make sure it's all well and good to eat healthy and be active. But to address the

middle schoolers and students, you have to make it fun and interesting and get them all excited.

Rose Shin: So yes, for sure. You can't get students involved if you don't bring either food or something fun for them to do.

Raihanna Ali: A game. Yes.

Rose Shin: We started with the BMI and wanted to figure out a way to introduce some healthy food choices. And so then started this track with the school which didn't exist before. Is that right?

Raihanna Ali: Yeah. Basically, the group, the board, and FLIPANY, we started to improve the health and wellness at the school. Basically, health and wellness at the school to improve that climate. We had a few projects we started at the school. In conjunction, we also had started a youth advisory board where they would give us input of what they would like to see change. So out of that came out that we would start a marathon challenge. At the time, about 50% of the school, the students walked or biked home. I think since COVID, it has probably changed a little bit as everybody readjusted to the new normal. But at the time, and this is like four or five years ago, 50% of the school. Getting the other half now to walk or bike or skate or just be active and to log those miles.

We would have some appreciation gifts for them and it culminated. FLIPANY had their fun run. Everybody participated in that at the end to finish off their marathon miles. We also had people each grade compared their miles so it was a little competition to see which grade would have the most miles and how far, how far those miles will get you across the U.S.

Rose Shin: That sounds fun.

Raihanna Ali: Yeah. It tied into the school's teaching, their teaching goals at the time. Route 66, we had a whole other thing. But the school had a similar logo with education and trying to improve the grades and get everybody excited so it tied in quite well.

Rose Shin: It started with the physical activity and some of the cooking. What inspired you to want to do this work and get involved with this project?

Raihanna Ali: I've always realized that to be involved in my children's lives is the most important thing. That's the easiest way to find out what they're doing, when they're doing, to keep track of them, yes. Maybe I might hover a little bit, but then as they get older, I back off. But I just had some time and I realized there was a need. There are a lot of parents who are, at the time a lot of parents would be willing to help the elementary students because everybody just loves seeing their children and maybe... But at middle school, we think they're a little older. We don't think they need help, or we don't think, but a lot of activities that parents are required. We still need help.

Maybe you're not going to be hands on with your child. I got involved because I mean, I have the time and it was something that I am passionate about in terms of making sure everybody has access to the knowledge of health, how to be healthy, how to just keep physically active. Just little thing, little changes can make such a huge improvement to that. I keep my children involved with me

also. The best way to keep track of them is to have them with me and getting them involved in all the different activities and whatever we were doing, and having us do it as a family.

Rose Shin:

Great. Deerfield Beach Middle School, just to give a little background, there's about 1,200 students that attend. 82% qualify for the free and reduced lunches. It's about 54, 55% African American Black, 30% Hispanic, 12% White. And then 2% is the mixed race and 2% is Asian. We have a high Haitian and Brazilian community in Deerfield Beach, so we have a high percentage that speak Creole and Portuguese as well, so to add to the diversity of the neighborhood. You said that many had walked and biked which does add to the health and wellness and to the congregation of the school. Deerfield Beach Middle is a tough school. It's in an area where kids, if they're bored will not get into the right directions. And so it's been a lot of work that you have put into as well with yourself and your kids to get the kids motivated in something that's healthy for them, but also healthy for the community to help them have a, again, have a voice and have a say about how things can happen.

You talked about the marathon challenge, which I think is great. I mean, how many middle schoolers volunteer to do a marathon? FLIPANY did an annual marathon of 5k and a 10k where the students did participate and won awards for their age bracket. It's nice how it tied into the school system as well. From there, we were able to carry on the project into this broader sense. Right. Can you tell a little bit more about... So we started with the marathon and then there was a water challenge that the kids had also initiated. Can you talk a little bit about what pre-pandemic, what it was like with the cafeteria and the challenges that happened that the kids had selected and in some of the events and activities that came from there?

Raihanna Ali:

Yeah. Well, the water challenge was a big thing. Even though, yes, they do move. They're fairly physically active some of them. They do drink a lot of sugar-sweetened beverages. So that was an issue that they thought that we should address in terms of promoting the reduction of the sugars, those beverages. And so we had posters about comparing, comparing how much sugar was in a can of soda or some fruit juice or tea, coffee. Just letting them know the numbers. We had some information on that. And then we also challenged them to just drink water for 30 days, see how long they could do it. I would go to the school lunchtime because it was pre-COVID as you said and there was no problem being at the school in the cafeteria, except it's very loud. But otherwise I would provide water bottles because that was another thing.

Some students were a bit skeptical of drinking water from the water fountain. They would prefer their own water bottle, their own supply. I think at the time the cafeteria was not providing or selling water at the time. So I would go around and everybody wanted a water bottle and everybody wanted water. And to culminate the end of that challenge, I prepared fruit and vegetable infused waters for a week and it was very popular. Students gave honest feedback. I researched recipes. I tried to give some things they would know, things that maybe they wanted to familiar with, but combinations that were popular. They would all come. They would get some time before lunch was over and everybody would line up and get their little cup. It was very popular.

Till this day, my children at the high school and I see high schoolers and they're like, "Oh, I remember you. I remember those fruit infused water." I was like,

"Wow, do you still do that at the middle school?" I was like, "Wow." It's carried through and they remember because it was a fun thing to break up. You go to lunch, you eat your lunch, go back to class. But we had these little, something different at lunchtime and it was healthy because we promoted it. We told them there was no sweeteners in this. This is just fruit infused water. They were really happy about it and really willing to try it.

Rose Shin: We've now talked about some of the positive stuff. Can you share some of the challenges that you have seen and faced in connection to the work that you've done?

Raihanna Ali: I think one of the main challenge is you put a lot of effort and time in trying to motivating participation. It takes a lot to get a few people out. I think that's at the student level. Even when we had community events, like the parents, if you had 10, 25 people in a school of 1,200, that's still a lot because there's so many other things that they prefer to do or rather do. The main challenge is getting that participation and that continued participation. We work hard to maintain relationships, to keep in contact, to make sure that they're in touch with whatever's a new thing that we want to do. And always making sure that once you see everybody, you keep in contact, but you forget feedback, current feedback as to what they're interested in.

To try and keep that interest going every time we try to do something. It always helps to have some form of incentive. As you said earlier, whether it's some food, a snack, a healthy snack, or sometimes a gift card or a fancy water bottle. They love swag, kids love swag, whatever it is. I mean, wherever you go, they love to collect stuff and things that maybe they won't normally get. But that motivation to keep people coming back week after week, that has been a challenge.

Rose Shin: Yes. I think what you spoke of regarding relationships and the continued efforts that you make to build those relationships is really important. I do want to remind everyone that you can put your questions in the Q&A section and we'd be happy to answer any as we are just kind of chit-chatting about our project, but we are interested in hearing what you would like to know specifically as well. We do have one actually that I'm going to read to you, Rahanna. From Elizabeth, "What do you suggest rural county towns do to combat food insecurities that may not have as many resources or funding as bigger towns and counties?" It's an important one because funding is an avenue.

Raihanna Ali: Well, we've realized how much community gardens can play a part in providing food for the community. Because in Deerfield Beach, we do have a few community gardens. Some of the produce is sold, but a lot of it is donated to the local, the pantries or nearby churches or faith-based groups. It has been quite successful. I think that is something that people could look more towards in terms of there's not a big budget, you just need land. Most people are quite willing to volunteer. A lot of people come into garden because it's part of like a mental health, it helps you relax. A lot of I think towns and communities, if you talk to these communities, they're willing to set aside some space that could be used as a community garden.

Rose Shin: I think that is a great suggestion about the community gardens. The other piece I'd like to add is there was a lot of work done in just knocking on doors and talking to the businesses in the area. To make this sustainable and to make this

something that the community can continue, we needed donations. For the resources, the funding lasts for a certain amount of time and you can have it for startup, but then there is that important need of sustaining. Going around to the different businesses and different organizations, community organizations that were focused in Deerfield Beach was very helpful. We partnered with an individual who is his efforts are towards mental health, and because Deerfield Beach also had some issues with suicide in our community.

And so that banded us together in a different issue. We were able to collaborate with other organizations that were interested in just health and wellness in general. Going out there and just speaking with the different organizations and businesses, especially in small towns, it's about making that connection and saying what it is that you are looking for. And then word will start spreading and connections will eventually formulate. You'll speak to someone who spoke to someone else, and then it's now come full circle back to you. So that's another way is just to speak to the people that are in your community. The community garden is also a great source for food and also community building. So if there is that ability in the rural community that you're in, that's something else to definitely look into. We do have another question as well from Marisa. "What is the biggest hurdle to food security in your community?"

Raihanna Ali:

I think on a smaller note is that when we first started off food distributions, fresh produce while it is available, I think many have the misconception that it's expensive, that it's going to spoil fast, that it's not going to last, or maybe they don't know how to prepare it. Having that constant supply of fresh produce, and it did vary from week to week, month to month, whenever we did it, that was a big eye opener for many people in the community. In terms of realizing that fresh produce, ways to cook it. We would discuss, exchange recipes. We would realize that it's fresh. It lasts long. It's not that expensive when you think about it. People have a bit of misconceptions when it got to healthy eating and the cost that it entails. And that's a big thing in the community in terms of people don't really buy too much fresh produce and get those benefits from that.

Rose Shin:

I think, like you said, right on the access or just the thought of buying fresh produce and diversifying is a big one. The food distributions as well, we hold weekly food distributions, well, curbside because of COVID instead of opening the pantry at this moment, we are doing the curbside distribution of food. And that going back also to the question about resources has brought in a different sense of community. People are asking Rahanna about recipes and how to cook certain foods. We did partner with Farmshare as well to be able to get more food, fruits and vegetables to distribute to the community which has been a huge success for Deerfield Beach because they have access to junk food. They have access to the cheaper food that's not nutritious. And our goal with the food pantry is to supply it as well with more nutritious items so that if they are in need, they can go to the middle school and we're hoping to expand it as well to our Deerfield Beach High School.

There's another question from Marisa, "What age group is the Cooking Matters class aimed? Is it through the school or community center?" I can answer that one. The Cooking Matters program is a program implemented through FLIPANY. The age group is elementary and middle school is the main bracket, but it is available for community as well. There's for adults, for families, for parents of young children. So it does cover different age groups. When we did it at the middle school, it was for the middle school kids. It was teaching them the

fundamentals, the basics about the five food groups, but also how to cook healthier and just learn more about nutrition. What to look for when you read labels and looking at the ingredient list. So for us, it's all about knowledge. Empowering them with the knowledge so that they can make the decisions that suit their lives. We give them information that they can then adapt and take from there what could improve their health and wellness for their lives and family. Can you talk more about what it is you all are doing in the community using the waste for the garden was interesting?

Raihanna Ali: Oh, I see questions piling up so I'll be quick. We are collecting whatever food waste. When we do have our distribution, some of the material is for compost. We are in the process of setting up compost bins and a system of getting the waste in the bins. And people managing it and looking after to making sure whatever we compost we get at the end of the process is used right in the school garden at the moment. That process, we're working on that, but it's almost there. We have all the bins and everything is getting set up.

Rose Shin: Setting it up so that, you know, educating the school as well and educating the students about what's compostable, what's not compostable and having the necessary bins so that they can distribute the food into the proper bins. And if not, then we'll do it. We'll get down there and distribute the food into the proper bins and what is compostable. And then we do have compost bins at the garden where you put the food scraps and waste, and eventually that will turn into soil that you can use for the garden that exists at the school. I hope that answered your question. If not, please feel free to do a follow up question. Can you explain how the impact of food security has affected children's mental health?

Raihanna Ali: Go ahead, Rose, I think.

Rose Shin: What we tried to do as well with the food pantry and not call it a food pantry is call it, it's the neighborhood market. It's a school neighborhood market located in the middle school. Because what we wanted to do was destigmatize the need for food. So if people want to go to the market for a snack, go for some food that they wanted to take home to their family that we could do that without stigmatizing the child for coming. We're trying to normalize it so that the kids can understand that there are resources available for them and if they need to utilize those resources, that it's not a shameful thing. We're trying to make it a normalized thing. Hey, grab a bag of healthy popcorn from the pantry instead of, oh, if you need extra food, you should go over there to the pantry that's next to the cafeteria. We're trying to normalize it so that those that are hungry or embarrassed about it won't have that stigma.

For that, it's not just the mental health of the food security, it usually has a bigger picture behind it as well regarding the mental health. If we can identify it, then we can reach out to the family in some way, because perhaps there could be some addiction, perhaps there could be some neglect. Those are all factors that affect a child's mental health. It's not just the aspect of food. There's a reason behind it. And so what we'd like to know is, or at least work with the community partner to say, hey, this is what we found, and be able to provide some resources in that way. We found that it's not just about the food, the food security, there's other things happening in the house. This helps give us a pathway into providing some more resources that could help. With the kids

being at home due to COVID, how have you adapted the programs to encourage participation?

Raihanna Ali: Well, for us here in Broward County in Florida, students are 100% back, 100% back at school, however limited visitors. It all depends on the principal. That's why we have continued, the food distribution is curbside. You come up, pick up. We do have permission because after school activities restarted at the school. So we have permission and you just have to get clearance for our visitors and whoever's running our programs.

Rose Shin: We had to do it in stages. When the kids were at home and everyone was home, we shifted the meetings to Zoom and worked hard to do the Zoom meetings. We still adapted our programming so that we can reach out to the kids, did phone calls in other ways to reach out to them. And then also had the group meetings and activities for the kids. Regarding the food pantry and neighborhood market, as Rahanna said, we shifted that because right now the principal is very conscious of it. Florida itself has different requirements. For this particular site, the kids, in order to bring the food to the families, we have a curbside distribution so that all of the families that are in need can just drive up to the parking lot.

And then we can still do a contactless food distribution to wherever, to their trunk or to their car. Right now we are not fully on campus. We are curbside. With the kids, we started with all outdoor activities so that we still adhered to distancing with the children and still got them active. Because we knew how important it was for them to connect and all the kids were participating because they were hungry to connect. We did the garden activities soon after the school reopened. There was a lot of interest in doing a lot of the outdoor activities and learning more about it. We did shift and we're still adapting as to how our programming will run. Next question says, "Hi Rahanna and Rose. Have you noticed a huge difference on participation depending on the incentives provided to children?" That is a great question. We're running out of time.

Raihanna Ali: Yes.

Rose Shin: I apologize. Go ahead and answer that one.

Raihanna Ali: Yeah, definitely. Word of mouth, it spreads. Whenever we do gift cards or something similar related monetary stuff, by word of mouth, the next presentation is always packed. The incentives depend on word of mouth when they spread it about. It always helps with their participation. Yes. I mean, even the simple things like water bottles, something that they could carry that's branded. It always helps. We know that and that's why we always try to have incentives available. We advertise it so they know that they'll get a gift, something for participation and attending.

Rose Shin: And food. Whenever we had a food demo, the kids were more likely to participate. Hopefully we can get back to more hands on, but for now we do a food demo, we pass out the food. Soon hopefully we can have the kids participate again. So yes, the incentives definitely did help and so just bringing the food. Any last words Rahanna that you'd like to share, any stories that you had that we can leave with our audience?

Raihanna Ali:

I think at the end of the day, everyone, no matter what their income level or situation or how much, they're always thankful. Like when we do the food distribution, they're always thankful for that help that food provides and the fresh produces. It involves everybody because parents come pick up their kids. Sometimes the kids show initiative, they pick up on behalf of their parents. A mother told me that she was like, "I didn't even know he knew I was registered for this." He came and asked and checked if his mom's name is on the list and he picked it up for her. It was waiting for when she picked him up. We're affecting the community at all levels and I think it's really an important role that we have here, and to continue, to make sure it continues.

Rose Shin:

All right. Thank you, Rahanna. We'll see you all back at the main group.