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By Racquel Palmese

Kelly Meyer is a mother of four, the wife of a Hollywood studio head, a major environmentalist, and a passionate advocate for school gardens. The keynote speaker at the recent Green California Schools and Community Colleges Summits plenary session, she set a tone of enthusiasm and energy in creating opportunities for kids to not only learn about the environment, but to experience it. Meyer is co-founder of the American Heart Association's "Teaching Gardens," which address childhood obesity by integrating nutrition and fitness into schools. Her goal is to have 500 gardens over the next few years, and 1,000 soon after that.

You have dedicated much of your time and energy to raising awareness about environmental issues. Would you give us an overview of the kinds of work you've done?

Right now, I'm working a lot with the NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council). I've done a lot of work with schools on solar energy, environmental curriculum and school gardens. I began working with the principal of my local elementary school on an environmental curriculum 10 years ago before it was common in schools. I learned a lot there, and then being a trustee with NRDC and working on larger issues of climate change gave me a balanced overview.

Was there a seminal point when you knew you wanted to become deeply involved in school gardens?

I realized that people were not coming out on issues related to climate change, maybe due to fear, or maybe because they were overwhelmed by the strange media bias about whether it even exists. I was invited to the joint session of Congress when President Obama presented his healthcare policy. It was a rare occurrence in history, to convene both houses and present your policy.

I took two Olympic athletes, with me - [Laird Hamilton](#), a big wave surfer, and [Gabrielle Reese](#), a pro-volleyball player. They're parents and they are extremely healthy and connected to the earth. They looked around wondering why people who seemed to have no awareness of the body-mind-spirit connection were making decisions about healthcare. They were asking, "What can we do, as healthy people with a real-life perspective, to change healthcare? What can we do to bring people together?"

I felt their questions were right on the money. Why do we keep putting these things in the hands of people who are not really connected to what's actually happening?

What was it about that event that was unsettling to you?

We saw the great divide developing between the Democrats and Republicans. That's when Congressman Joe Wilson (R, South Carolina) stood up and said "You Lie!" You could see how they weren't going to solve the issues of health. They were just fighting to decide between choosing a mop or a bucket instead of turning off the faucet. They were fighting between Plan A or Plan B to fund an unhealthy society.

I wondered what could walk away with from this experience. What could I do to try and maybe bring people together to address

health issues, and at the same time give kids a touchstone to the environment? How could I bring a little bit of the environment to them, and in turn teach them about nutrition and fitness?

I had an epiphany then about planting gardens in schools to teach kids about the environment in relation to obesity, because right now that's the epidemic that people are talking about. Food resonates with all people in a real way; it's your first and most intimate connection to the environment. Planting these gardens in schools, and giving kids a chance to play with the soil and to understand things like how plants gather energy from the sun and how adding a little water, a little love and nutrients from the soil creates something of beauty and value. It's an invaluable experience.

I found that with school gardens, people would run towards the ideas of personal and environmental health, rather than away from them. It was different from focusing on climate change or coming head on about issues like toxic waste that I'd been working on and advocating for over many years.

This seems to really resonate and bring people together. That's what is exciting.

I watched a video of you at a school garden, and I don't know if I ever saw a bigger smile on someone's face.

It's true. It makes you happy because these kids are happy touching the soil. They might live in communities with bad air and no parks and no trees. For them there's really a sense of wonder, a little piece of the magic of nature. It's the most satisfying thing when, for the first time, a kid sees a spider and gets so excited. We tell them that spiders are our friends, they help in the garden, and worms aerate the soil and that means you have healthy soil and if you don't have worms then your soil's not good.

Even though I have a lot of big companies that back me and support me and help spread the awareness of the nutrition piece, it just feels really good that we leave something behind for these kids, something that's there after we leave the school. They understand what it takes to grow real food, what it takes to make something succeed. It's a lesson—and if they don't take care of the garden and it doesn't work, it's still a lesson.

How do you put a school garden project together?

First of all, I found a school principal that I had a relationship with and we co-founded a garden at our local public school. We self-funded it and just did it. Then we found other schools that she knew would be good prospects. Once the American Heart Association was onboard, they started a grant process. They have regional offices across the country and they would find out who was willing to work hard and keep up a garden.

How did you obtain funding to broaden the program?

We reached out to other companies, such as [Aetna](#), who is going to do gardens for nurses as a community service opportunity. We find areas where companies are serving a certain community and we work with their corporate responsibility teams because we know that our work will be supported. Aetna's garden program is a training opportunity program for nurses.

Often, companies will identify organizations and projects that are important to them. For example, we work with [Mission Serve](#) a lot because we try to use veterans to help us maintain and sustain these gardens, and we also employ them, which is really wonderful. We do gardens at schools on military bases, in Hawaii and at Camp Pendleton.

Your goal is 1,000 gardens. Is that realistic?

It is absolutely realistic because the [AHA](#) [American Heart Association] has made it one of their goals, and they have the infrastructure and the financing to make it happen. The goal is 500 gardens within the next two years, but at the rate we're going – this is the first year and we already have 160 - it becomes exponential. At first we planted 23 gardens, and then the next year there were 160. I'm hoping that the next year will bring 250 and then we're getting close.

Ideally, I would love to start connecting people who are like-minded, so when a thoughtful idea springs up we can link them with other people who are doing positive things in this space. Just make footprints as far and wide as we can with anything that's supportive of connecting kids to whole food.

Who are the stakeholders in these garden projects? I assume parents?

We have volunteers, and then the AHA and other sponsors help out. There are students, the families, the teachers and administration. The last school we did we had a lot of amazing support because they are very active. There was great leadership in the school and they got a lot of people onboard. We often bring celebrities to help for the day, to get kids excited. But ultimately, the people who make it work are the parents and the teachers and the volunteers from the AHA.

Should parents and community members be taking a more active role in their schools now that budgets are being cut? What can they do to make a difference?

I can only speak from my own experience. I began by starting a recycling program, which costs very little money and can actually make money. We collected plastic bottles and made a little film called "The Backyard Advocate" about kids in their own backyards doing something for their community and advocating for the environment. In order to raise money to make that little video, we collected plastic bottles. In the first year we made \$1,800 and gave it to Heal the Bay.

Hooking up with this organization, we all saw how alarming the situation is with the amount of plastic in the environment. We started selling reusable canvas bags and reusable drink containers, and that's how we raised the money for our film. The kids started selling the bags to parents and encouraged them to use them while shopping. We set some up at the local stores, and we also sold reusable drinking containers so people could bring those for lunch instead of plastic bottles. Ultimately, we got rid of

plastic and started trash-free lunches.

That might be easier in a suburban school district where parents tend to be more involved and have more time to devote to volunteering at their schools.

Absolutely. However, I met a teacher on a plane who was from a very economically depressed community. I told her about the project, and she was really interested. I think teachers are really craving these kinds of projects and opportunities to teach their kids in a real way. She said they don't have any money to fund a garden, and I suggested that they could raise money by collecting plastic like we did. She said her kids look at throwing away plastic as a feather in their caps. For them, conservation is a reminder that they're poor. Being wasteful is cool. I thought that's understandable, but crazy. Conserving and reusing, not throwing away plastic is really the goal here, and that's what makes you cool. I thought that was a really interesting moment.

In an elite community like Malibu with the schools that I get to operate in as a parent, you realize that giving back is a luxury, and being able to do these projects is a total luxury. Those parents in the inner city area are working full-time, they don't have the time to think about reusable water bottles. They want the cheapest thing quickly and let's get on with it. In those communities the PTAs don't raise a million dollars a year to support an already well-run school. It's absurd and sad.

The principal of the school where I started my first garden was really my partner in crime on so many of these projects. She has worked with the Gates Foundation, and now she's a superintendent with another school district. It was great having that administrative support for the environmental curriculum and all that we got done.

How do you build awareness about environmental issues in a community?

It's about indoctrinating, and I use that word intentionally. It sounds like brainwashing, but you really do have to indoctrinate students so they can understand the issues. Otherwise they'll just go into the world believing the spin, which is there's no climate change, you can throw away as much as you want, fossil fuel energy doesn't harm the environment – all the things that obviously people who don't understand, or don't want to understand, the complexity of these issues think about.

It's just like junk food. People see it on TV and get indoctrinated into the junk food culture. And kids are watching TV more than ever. [ed. note: According to the American [Academy](#) of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Children in the United States watch an average of three to four hours of television a day. By the time of high school graduation, they will have spent more time watching television than they have in the classroom.]

In TV ads, they see oil companies talking about their 'green energy' or 'clean coal' as the answers to our environmental challenges. What are they supposed to believe? Most aren't reading the *New York Times*. I believe that kids have to learn to process information in a real way because they're the decision makers for the future.

Will being awed by a lady bug in a school garden really lead to a lifetime of environmental awareness?

The micro really does lead to the macro, and figuring out wind and solar energy and the important technologies to make the huge shifts, will take a population of young people who are willing to adopt it and embrace it and stand up for it. Having respect for a ladybug, and understanding the role that it plays in helping us fill our most basic need, which is food, may help kids stand up to the imbalance that exists in the information they get bombarded with.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said recently that the best schools don't look like kids sitting at a desk in a classroom in the same old way. They're moving, they're learning while they move, while they're doing something. That relates to our gardens, and how you learn about science and math in the garden while you're outside and engaged.

That's an important statement about what we're doing, but also about the change in education and which way we should be going to better serve our kids. Sitting in classrooms isn't going to do it. You want to learn about physics, sweep a playground, dig a hole. To learn about biology, plant a seed – all those types of hands-on learning. Our kids build the boxes for their garden as they learn about three dimensional thinking. They have to start using basic skills that most people don't even have anymore.