



Linda Novick O'Keefe

March 6, 2013

Founding Chief Executive Officer, Common Threads

Sarah Elizabeth Ippel of the Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC) talks food, wellness, and the stepping stones for the future.

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with the Academy for Global Citizenship's Sarah Elizabeth Ippel - the core of her amazing efforts have developed into a learning lab for broader systemic change in the community. Not only is she a fan of one of the healthiest veggies around, kale, but she was also recently recognized with Chicago Magazine's Green Award in 2010 and continues to serve as an advocate for positive change in the fight for sustainability in our local and global food systems.

While traveling to over 80 countries across six continents comprehensively observing educational philosophies and world languages, Ippel arrived in Chicago to find issues parallel to her experiences across the globe. "I was struck by the disparities that exist in terms of access to education internationally, and upon moving to Chicago, I quickly learned that these same realities and challenges existed in my own backyard," says Ippel, "I saw how health was impacting children's ability to learn." That was 2008 and when Ippel founded the Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC), a Chicago Public Charter School located on the underserved Southwest side of Chicago. AGC's philosophy was created with the premise that health needed to be incorporated as part of a more holistic educational framework to support students and families.

To what others may seem intricate to accomplish in an urban setting, Ippel saw raw potential. In 2008, AGC opened their doors in a former dental tool factory, where green space was nowhere to be found. Her visionary team noticed a massive asphalt parking lot adjacent to the building and saw great potential. What was once a dull place for cars, blossomed into their first set of organic gardens. I'd like to bring to light how beautiful it is to hear someone speak of how grateful they are for something as simple as an empty parking lot - especially when they envisioned something unimaginable and made it possible. Ippel went on to tell me about their second year when AGC moved to a former barrel factory, where they have created a center for urban sustainability.

"We have our schoolyard chickens, organic gardens, zero-waste cafeteria, solar energy learning lab and greenhouse, as well as many other elements," says Ippel. AGC uses their outdoor area as a classroom and model for other schools, showing what can be accomplished in a very urban environment.

What was once considered a very industrial community can now be viewed as a sustainable sanctuary, thanks to AGC's presence at 47th and Cicero. AGC serves a 90% minority, 83% low-income population in a neighborhood where access to positive foods is a challenge, in addition to

access to high-quality public education and early childhood resources. Ippel's next steps to addressing these challenges include building a campus that truly emanates the very essence of their mission, "to be an international learning laboratory in public education, clean technology and urban agriculture." This includes taking their program one step further by growing food on their schoolyard farm for the community at large.

Ippel and I share a common belief when it comes to tackling the issue of childhood and school-wide culture of health - that it is going to take a village, with a variety of ingredients and participants for change to occur. "I think often times we have visitors at our school who think that it is one quick or easy fix, such as the food that were feeding our students or the way we are incorporating yoga," says Ippel, "but in terms of student and family health, creating a comprehensive health culture is required for positive outcomes." At AGC, students become environmentally and internationally minded by learning how their choices impact their community and ultimately the world. As a community of learners, families and teachers work collaboratively to ensure the learning environment supports high achievement; health and nutrition are incorporated on a daily basis in both the educational and curricular framework. Although it may not be a "one size fits all" approach, the values that AGC has embodied since day one are absolutely scalable and replicable and can transcend demographic differences.

For nearly 10 years I have witnessed the incredible impact these skills and experiences can have on a child. In 2003, Chef Art Smith, artist Jesus Salgueiro and I founded Common Threads, a nonprofit organization that teaches low-income children how to cook wholesome, affordable meals. Both AGC and Common Threads are intentional about developing and fostering a connection with what's happening at schools and how we can begin to integrate these elements at home, around the dinner table or in our backyard gardens.

Like so many of us, Ippel and her body of activists are forever learning and therefore, moving one footstep closer to positive change. AGC stresses six components, "serving the whole child, collaborating with families, fostering environmental stewardship, cultivating international mindedness, developing inquirers and modeling academic excellence" that are incorporated into the very founding principles of AGC. "We utilize these tenets as a lens through which all our decisions are made," she says. "They inform every decision we make throughout the school day, creating and fostering a school culture that reflects our mission."

Learning how others are tackling the concerns of childhood health and wellness in their own ways are subjects that will forever excite me. I'm a big believer in the sharing of best practices and having the opportunity to tap into the intellect of such a positive leader as Sarah Elizabeth Ippel was a true delight. As we finished up our conversation, I couldn't help but ask a quirky, fun question - and the answer sincerely touched my heart. I asked Sarah what she considers to be her theme song.

She replied, "Our students have a theme song; Ben Harper's 'With My Own Two Hands'. It's beautiful. Hearing our students sing this song and seeing how they have embraced the message and turned it into action in their own lives has been a true inspiration for me."

It is inspiring to me - and I hope it is for you too.