The Sugar Tsunami

Background

Four years ago, I watched the documentary, “Food Inc.,” which kindled my interest in healthy eating. My curiosity fueled a Netflix binge of similar documentaries such as “Fed Up, Supersize Me, Knives Over Forks, etc.” and my outlook towards eating changed forever. Over time, I realized that fast food, sugary snacks, and sugary drinks are at the center of a burgeoning health crisis in the US and around the world. Spirited discussions over dinner and in the school commons groomed a passionate advocate in me rooting for healthy eating, especially interested in curbing the sugar excess.

Over the past 3-4 decades, the diabetes and obesity epidemic has slowly and silently unfolded around the world, threatening nearly half its population. At the center of this epidemic are the alarming rise of fast food restaurants and the consumption of sugary, processed foods. Shockingly, today the average person consumes 77lb of sugar each year, compared to 18 lb of sugar per year back in the 1800s. Recent research has identified the sugar surge as the prime factor fueling obesity driven diseases such as diabetes, metabolic syndrome and heart disease.

The sugar crisis disproportionately affects children and teens as they face the long-term consequences of prolonged sugar exposure early in their life. Childhood type 2 diabetes, virtually unheard of a few decades ago, has now reached alarming proportions. The WHO estimates that in 2015, about 42 million children aged under 5 years were overweight or obese. This is a sharp increase of about 11 million during the past 15 years, predisposing them for diabetes and heart
disease. Under the disguise of low fat / low cholesterol options, sugar and highly processed carbohydrates have quietly found their way in to children’s favorite cereals, snacks and drinks.

The Issue

Kids are neither aware of the sugar content of their favorite snacks and drinks nor its long-term health sequelae. Children are no match to the incessant barrage of commercials from the food industry and are often trapped in a vicious cycle driven by sugar craving and lack of access to healthy foods. Government policies such as agricultural subsidies for corn may have unwittingly contributed to this problem. Lack of awareness, affordability, and policy (or lack thereof) are drowning kids in a sugar tsunami. While organizations such as the WHO and the AHA are using considerable resources to spread awareness, the information is primarily available only to those who seek it. For kids to take back control of their health, it is essential to bridge the information gap and empower them with knowledge enabling them to make healthier choices.

My action plan/project

Since the fundamental issue at the individual level is a failure to recognize the problem, promoting awareness among children will be key to tackling this issue at its root. I founded the non-profit organization GINHA (Global Initiative for Nutrition and Health Awareness) as a platform to promote awareness among children about the risks of excessive sugar and the importance of choosing healthy foods over fast foods, sugary snacks and drinks. My goal was to reach out to school children through brochures, presentations, short movies, interactive sessions, and a website, and educate them about the health risks of excessive consumption of sugary foods. After considerable effort, I was able to create a website using a Wix® application, and obtain nonprofit 501(c)(3) status from IRS for my organization.

Progress/steps taken over the last one year since attending Brown Leadership Institute:
- Designed, developed and printed brochures with the help of mentors (Encl. 1)
- Distributed printed brochure to local schools (Encl. 2)
- Distributed electronic brochure to schools – using electronic distribution service “Peach jar.”
- Displayed posters at schools highlighting the sugar content of popular snacks/drinks. (Encl. 3)
- Opened checking account at a local credit union to facilitate receiving grants.
- Regularly updated and refined website every 2 to 3 months (www.ginha.org)
- Screened movies/presentations led interactive sessions and conducted nutrition surveys at schools in India (Encl. 4; survey attached as pdf; presentation/movie DVD mailed separately)
- Donated nutrition documentary movies (Fed Up, Food Inc., etc.) to schools in India. (Encl. 5)
- Received endorsement from St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Mr. Adam Wainwright (Encl. 6)
- Received grants from large nonprofit sources - Clifbar Family Foundation, Merrill Lynch
- Applied for grants - Walmart foundation, Monsanto foundation, Youth Services of America
- 1-year anniversary report – reached out to 900 children in India, 3600 in St. Louis area schools. Filed returns with IRS and Missouri State Secretary.

While I am happy with the progress of my project, there is still a lot more to accomplish. I plan to expand my nonprofit to other cities through local chapters and volunteers. I hope to continue my effort to spread this message about curbing sugar surge among kids and teens for many more years using innovative approaches.

**Lessons learned, insights gained; my evolution as a leader since attending Brown institute:**

I realized while it was easy to draft plans for my project, executing it and putting ideas into practice was the most challenging. Every step of the way there was a hurdle - some as simple as finding a bank that would maintain a checking account without a hefty fee, and others as laborious as writing a ten-page grant request. The bureaucracy was perhaps the most agonizing hurdle; I was
surprised to experience bureaucracy both at the benefactor and beneficiary level. I learned it requires utmost patience and perseverance to succeed. Often my email requests to schools asking to distribute brochures to their students were denied or ignored. I learned not to be discouraged by small setbacks, but to continue to stay focused on the cause. Balancing GINHA’s activities with my packed school schedule was another challenge I learned to overcome. Systematic planning and setting a specific time for each activity in advance helped me immensely.

Every time I interact with school children and see their eyes light up with surprise when they realize that a can of Coke has 9 teaspoons of sugar in it, I feel inspired to do more. Every time I volunteer at St. Louis Children’s Hospital and see young kids hospitalized for diabetes and obesity-related diseases, I perceive the need for change and persevere with a renewed sense of purpose.

Working towards the goals of GINHA, I was able to identify my distinct interest to teach and motivate children. I realized global health inequities motivate me to learn more and contribute more. I learned it is important to prioritize and focus on activities that are most meaningful to me. The two weeks at the Brown leadership institute was an immersive experience that helped me learn many valuable skills about communicating ideas effectively, giving shape to an idea, and methodically planning and executing a project. Above all, BYLI has taught me how to be an inclusive, respectful, and effective leader - valuable skills when I am advocating for my cause in the community.

**Tips and advice for future Leadership Institute students**

My advice would be to choose an issue that is close to your heart. It can be simple and unique to your community or elaborate and apply to the entire world. It doesn’t matter if the project idea overlaps with existing ideas or is different. Given the extent of diverse needs at the community level, every idea, brought to action, will have the potential to help society. Stay committed and passionate about making a change, and it will be successful and impactful