



THE RETHINKERS' SPEECHES

Georgia Organics Conference

February 19-20, 2010

Victoria Carter:

Hello, my name is Victoria Carter and I am a Rethinker from New Orleans, Louisiana.

As most of you know, Hurricane Katrina destroyed or badly damaged most of our New Orleans schools. Right now, we are rebuilding those schools, and we'll be rebuilding them for the next ten years. Rethink is a nonprofit organization that puts the voices of students - US - into the rebuilding process. We Rethinkers are working to make many changes that benefit the students.

As some of you might know, one of our biggest projects has to do with school food. That's what we are here to talk with you about today and Saturday. Thanks for inviting us to Georgia!

To begin our presentation today, we invite you to watch one of our many Rethink videos. This one is called "Young Leaders Transforming their Schools." It will give you a taste of Rethink.

= Video =

I hope this video gave you a glimpse of who we Rethinkers are and what we do. For those of you who came here thinking we are just kids, I am sorry to say WE ARE WAY MORE!

Every summer at Rethink summer school, we pick a problem to solve in the New Orleans school system, and we work on that problem for six weeks – finally coming up with a solution and recommendation for change. How do we pick our issue?

Three years ago we did a survey called New Orleans Public Schools from the Point of View of Students. We interviewed over 500 students from different schools in New Orleans. “Food” came up so many times that it caught our eyes. So in the summer of 2008 we decided to tackle school food and cafeterias and we have been working on the subject ever since.

For us Rethinkers, food is no ordinary subject. It’s not just something we put into bodies for energy, it’s an important part of what makes US US. Gumbo, crawfish etoufe, red beans and rice...that’s who we are as New Orleanians – and who our parents and our grandparents are, too.

We began that summer of 2008 making a list of problems we saw in the cafeterias. We then invited experts such as chefs, architects, and other food experts, like our own Ms. Johanna Gilligan from the New Orleans Food and Farm Network, to help us figure out solutions to those problems. Those guest speakers explained to us the challenges behind getting better food into our cafeterias and not even those challenges could scare off the Rethinkers! At the end of the summer we held a big news conference and we presented our 12 recommendations for school change to the media, our school superintendent, and anyone willing to listen to what kids think should be changed in our public schools. Our superintendent said before the cameras that he agreed with every single one of our recommendations ...and we have been holding his feet to the fire ever since. Our first battle was getting rid of the useless plastic utensil called the SPORK.

Now I would like to introduce you to Jada Cooper who will tell you all about the Spork.

Jada Cooper:

Hello my name is Jada Cooper and I am a Rethinker

Have you ever tried to eat with a spork? If you have, then you know that a spork is a half spoon and a half fork, but it’s useless! I want to tell you a story about trying to eat gumbo with a spork.

One of the other Rethinkers named Victor told us a story about trying to eat some type of meat with a spork. He tried to cut his meat with a spork, but it didn’t work, so he had to break the spork in half and to use the sharp edge to cut his meat.

Another Rethinker named Ronaldo spent one lunchtime trying to eat meat and gravy with a spork. He tried to cut the meat and couldn’t so he had to shove his hands in the meat and gravy and shove his food into his mouth. And remember, there were no sinks in the cafeteria, so he would have dirty fingernails all day until he got home! Disgusting!

Sporks are useless, but it was the only thing we students were given to eat with, until Rethink told the superintendent this needed to change. Because of our recommendations Sodexo has removed sporks from ALL public schools in New Orleans starting this fall!

Isaiah Simms:

Hello, my name is Isaiah Simms and I am a Rethinker.

Here are our 12 recommendations for school food change:

Recommendation 1: No more sporks! Give public school students knives, forks and spoons. Short term: supply biodegradable utensils. Long term: buy dishwashing equipment and give us metal utensils.

Recommendation 2: Buy fresh, tasty food. Give us as little highly processed food as possible. Keep preservatives, chemicals, and highly sweetened items to a minimum.

Recommendation 3: Buy fresh food from local farmers, fishermen, and shrimpers. We can have healthier food and keep our local economy strong at the same time. Fuel prices make transporting food around the country and world more expensive every week.

Recommendation 4: Present even more local dishes on the school menu. We love our New Orleans and Louisiana food. The ingredients can be bought fresh locally – shrimp, meat, okra, tomatoes, rice.

Recommendation 5: Present tasty, healthy food alternatives for vegetarians. Some of us cannot eat meat because of our religious convictions. Others are vegetarians for personal reasons.

Recommendation 6: No more Styrofoam trays! Short term, give us biodegradable trays. Long term, buy real trays or plates and wash them in dishwashers after each meal.

Recommendation 7: Future school designs should include outdoor vegetable gardens. Students need to grow fresh food and taste what they grow. Part of our education is learning that things taste better when they come right from the ground and not from a can.

Recommendation 8: Use leftover food to make compost for school gardens.

Recommendation 9: Design cafeterias that you adults would like to eat in yourselves. Give us light, comfortable chairs, murals on the walls, outdoor eating space. Check out our Rethink “21st century green cafeteria design!

Recommendation 10: Install sinks so we can wash our hands before eating.

Recommendation 11: Enough lunch time to enjoy our food and our friends. No more herding students into the cafeteria, standing in long lines, and eating with the time leftover. Our time eating is as important as our time in class.

Recommendation 12: No more silent lunches for any reason. Don’t tie punishment to food and cafeterias.

I am one of many Rethinkers who wrote those recommendations.

You might wonder why we Rethinkers CARED enough to write these recommendations. What MOTIVATES us? Well let me tell you my own story.

Two summers ago, 2008, was the first time we Rethinkers studied food. That summer we went to visit some shrimpers in Grande Isle, one of our major Louisiana shrimp areas. I was thirteen years old at the time, and I remember walking out onto the dock. First I noticed all these boats...and then I saw all these men, just sitting and standing around.

I asked a man on the dock, why aren't these guys out on their boats? Are they afraid they won't catch any shrimp today? "No," the man said, "there are plenty of shrimp out there. It's just that everyone is buying cheap shrimp from China. It's farmed there, it doesn't come out of the ocean. It's full of chemicals and guess what, it's CLONED from Louisiana brown shrimp! No one wants to buy Louisiana shrimp and most of us are out of work.'

When he said that, a light bulb went off in my head. An ocean full of shrimp and no business for shrimpers? That's insane! I realized that we have PLENTY of resources in Louisiana...but the problem is that we ARE NOT WILLING TO USE THE RESOURCES WE HAVE. If we were only willing to buy our own shrimp...our beautiful, HEALTHY, world famous Louisiana brown shrimp, we could put the shrimpers back to work. We could SAVE our historic Louisiana shrimp industry.

Then I thought. Why can't our SCHOOLS buy Louisiana shrimp? If all our public schools bought Louisiana shrimp, just think what a huge market that would be! Talk about a win win! Win for the schools and WIN for the shrimpers!

Most of us Rethinkers left the dock that day committed to helping the shrimpers, and that's how all our excitement began. We figured schools would WANT to buy local shrimp if they only understood what was going on.

After we wrote the recommendations you heard, we presented them to the superintendent and the head nutritionist for the public schools. They agreed with all our recommendations...EVEN buying local shrimp!!

They told us we would have to wait until we get a new food contract, but we will have one next September. So that's when we hope to see shrimp on the school menu. Believe me, if we don't see that shrimp, we Rethinkers will NOT be silent. We will keep pushing until our public schools buy local shrimp AND local vegetables AND local fruit. That's our goal, and that's my story.

Victoria Carter:

So in conclusion, we want to tell you about our successes and our next projects.

Here are our successes:

As you know, we got rid of sporks! The head of public school construction for the City of New Orleans made a rule that ALL new schools have to have...

hand washing sinks in the cafeterias
dishwashers in the kitchens
and garden spaces outside!

Our new school food contract will begin in September. It requires much more fresh food.

AND...our citywide food policy advisory council has adopted every single one of our food recommendations! They will present the recommendations to the New Orleans City Council this spring.

We have had a lot of successes, but we still have a long way to go.

Will the superintendent come clean on his promise to buy fresh shrimp and local vegetables? We intend to make sure he does. And this is how we will do it.

This spring, we Rethinkers will do school food report cards in the public schools. Hey, teachers grade us, so why can't we grade our school cafeterias? We want to know if schools have adopted our twelve recommendations for school change. After we conduct our surveys, we will hold a news conference to tell everyone what we found.

We hope to do school report cards and news conferences every year until our public schools have adopted every single one of our recommendations. Wish us luck!

Thank you!