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Amazing Woman Nominee: Kathryn Guylay Nurtures Low-Income Families

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by Liz Logan



Kathryn Guylay with husband and volunteer Jeff.

"I feel like a farmer," Kathryn Guylay says.

It's not a comment you hear from most 39-year-old Winnetka moms, but you start to understand when you see the two hens in her backyard, which provide her family with two fresh eggs a day.

The hens live in a coop next to her extensive garden, which she calls "The Jungle," where she grows cabbage, cucumbers, mustard greens, lettuce, rutabaga, numerous types of squash, peas, pumpkins, tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, chard and carrots.

Guylay isn't just farming for herself and her family: she's also growing a program to give low-income families the tools and knowledge to create healthy, nutritious meals.

"You can take [cooking]—something that's fun, that's cultural, that everyone does, and everybody should do—and optimize it," Guylay says. "Make it something that makes you feel good, makes you energetic and healthy."

Really?

Well, yes, apparently.

In 2008, Guylay founded the nonprofit [Nurture](#). With volunteers and a 10-member board including health, nutrition and fitness experts, the organization provides cooking classes to families that are eligible for food stamps, meaning they have a \$4-a-day food budget.

Guylay and her team teach families that even on a tiny budget, and with almost no time, it's still possible to create healthy meals using inexpensive slow cookers and rice cookers (provided), inexpensive grains such as brown rice and quinoa, beans, lentils and broth (also provided). Meat protein is almost a garnish.

Nuture teaches separate 2-hour classes for both kids and adults and sends families off with all the ingredients and the tools used that night.



A young student learns to cook with Nurture

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Guylay teaches from experience. "It was the way that I lived when I was in graduate school; I had absolutely no money," she says.

And forget cookbooks and recipes—those take too much time for a parent who has to pack four lunches before heading out to two jobs. Instead, Nurture teaches recipe frameworks: Add a grain, some broth, a little protein, turn on the slow cooker and voila! A healthy, satisfying meal is waiting for you at the end of the day.

An Evanston native and the daughter of a biochemist, Guylay learned the difference between carbohydrates and proteins at an early age. Her interest in nutrition piqued when she became a mom and was suddenly charged with feeding other people. A "recovering consultant," as she describes herself, she started a part-time certification program in nutrition when she decided to stay home with her two kids 6 years ago.

"I've had my own personal experiences with how nutrition can change your life—from a health standpoint from an energy standpoint—I've seen it with myself, my husband and my kids," she says.

And, of course, Nurture has come to be about much more than just food. When the families come back to the food pantry after their classes, there are hugs all around. Guylay has even hired some of the participants to teach recipes from their own cultures that can be made in a rice or slow cooker.

Feeling like you could use an easy, affordable recipe yourself? We've got Guylay's signature [fiesta casserole](#), or you can subscribe to the e-newsletter she puts together for her friends called "[Healthy Kids Ideas Exchange](#)."



Elena in the garden

Meanwhile, Guylay has certainly inspired her children—Alexander, 6, and Elena, 8—to eat healthy (they can't keep enough apples in the house) and to give back. This summer Elena held a produce stand selling bags of veggies from the garden for \$2.

She earned \$14, came home, handed her mom \$5, and said: "This is for Nurture."

Nurture is always seeking funds and volunteers. To get involved, visit the [Web site](#).

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