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As part of a healthy meal plan, McQueen's Child Care serves strawberries and yogurt for a Valentine's treat. Sammy Woodard, left, 4, and Erianna Ledbetter-Cooper, 4, enjoy their treats. Thalia McQueen, the daycare's director, has been working with the Child Care Nutrition Consultation Project on ways to provide a healthier menu for those in her care.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHN ROTTET

## Local daycares focus on diet care

*Child nutrition project gives caregivers insight into healthy meal planning*

BY ELIZABETH SHESTAK  
CORRESPONDENT

Rather than serve some store-bought chocolates to her preschoolers last month, Thalia McQueen decided to take a more nutritious route for Valentine's Day: strawberry mice.

Or rather, mice made out of strawberries, with almond slivers for ears, mini chocolate chips for eyes and a single, skinny strand of red licorice for a tail.

Partnered with some strawberry yogurt, sliced string cheese and strawberry milk, the 10 a.m. snack at McQueen's daycare provided a Valentine's Day theme without the hyperactive kick.

"I've never tasted pink milk before," said Trey Bredeen, 5. "It's good."

McQueen searched online for the nutritious Valentine's snack. Last fall she enrolled in the Child Care Nutrition Consultation Project to learn ways to better feed the children in her care without



Marie Milliren, left, project coordinator for Durham County's Child Care Nutrition Consultation Project, goes over meal planning with Angela McDonald, center, owner of Little Angels daycare, and Thalia McQueen, owner of McQueen's Child Care.

breaking her budget. She's lost more than 40 pounds herself, and says the children, and their families, are pleased with her new way of doing things.

The program, started in 2006, is funded by Durham's Partnership for Children, a Smart Start Initiative. The Durham Health Department delivers the pro-

gram to child care providers through Marie Milliren, a registered dietician and licensed nutritionist. She enrolls 20 to 25 centers a year, meeting teachers, giving presentations to parents, and helping plan menus.

"Eating healthy is an acquired taste," Milliren said. It's much easier to spend money on taste and convenience, often sacrificing nutrition. She realizes that not everyone is born with a love of cooking, or with an interest in fitness — and that's why some people really need to be taught about food and what it means for their overall health.

"It is a commitment, it is a personal choice," she said, and those choices are passed on to children.

### A local need

In 2007, nearly one in four low-income children ages 2 to 4

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## NUTRITION

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seen in WIC and child health clinics in Durham County were obese — nearly twice the state average.

Up to 75 percent of the calories a child will consume each day are at daycare, said Karine Stallings, community development manager for Durham's Partnership. Reaching child care providers can result in immediate improvements in a child's nutrition.

And that means a better future when they begin school, said Milliren. She cites studies showing children who eat breakfast focus better than children who get to school on an empty stomach. Early-childhood nutrition is found to affect long-term neurological development — poor diet can stunt brain potential.

The value of nutrition in a child's academic future is gaining mainstream acknowledgement. At a recent Durham City Council meeting, mayor pro-tem Cora Cole-McFadden said her strongest passion these days is hunger prevention among children.

"Children cannot learn when they are hungry," she said.

But it's not just about filling their tummies, Milliren said.

It's about making sure that what they are eating is good for them, too. In order to be a reg-

istered daycare, centers have to serve a minimum of foods from each food group at any given meal. For example, juice meets the fruit requirement. Centers that have at least 25 percent low-income children are eligible for federal subsidies through the Child and Adult Care Food Program — but if a center is caught not serving the required food groups, they can lose their funding.

One of the main services she offers the centers is help planning more healthful menus without breaking their budgets or violating menu requirements. At McQueen's, she's encouraged them to serve water instead of juice, a change that if anything saves money. She also hopes they incorporate snacks made from whole grains such as trail mix, and that children over 12 months drink reduced-fat milk rather than whole milk.

At private, home-based centers, making these changes is often manageable and can be done quickly. But for larger centers that serve as a chain under a corporation, even subtle changes can be difficult to apply.

Kim Jones is the director of La Petite Academy, a preschool that takes infants as young as 6 weeks old and also offers after-school care for older children. She said getting corporate approval for menu changes can take time, but she's hoping to get permission for her center to make a few small changes the

next time they make a major food order in a few weeks. They operate on a five-week cycle.

Such changes include ordering more fresh fruit rather than cans of cut fruit soaked in syrup, replacing white bread with whole grain bread, and finding more ways to get fresh vegetables on the menu.

Sharon Via is the cook at La Petite, but she mainly warms up the foods that come canned or frozen. The only thing they make fresh are the biscuits the children get for breakfast sometimes, and she'd like to add more to that list.

"I don't see where it's going to be difficult for me," she said. The little ones eat what is placed in front of them, she said. And the older ones learn over time.

### Eating healthy, early

Many parents worry about their children's eating habits. But Milliren tells parents just because a child is skinny or chubby now doesn't mean they'll stay that way as an adult.

The important thing is to instill healthy lifestyle habits from the beginning — and that means all aspects of eating, including learning how to sit and enjoy a meal in its entirety at a table, eating at regular intervals, and staying active throughout the day.

"The weight will take care of itself," Milliren said. The important thing is not to make children feel ashamed about their food choices — just provide healthy options to choose from.

Carolyn McNair, owner of the Creative Care Early Learning Program, has found Milliren's services a tremendous help.

McNair has added winter vegetables to her menu, such as pumpkin and greens, and said Milliren's advice was exceptionally helpful in dealing with a vegetarian family. She now has a vegetarian day once a week, and the child's parents have been grateful to see their lifestyle included in the center's agenda.

"I love her program, I really do," McNair said. "She's just been so faithful about coming in with us and working with me, and I've just learned so much from her."

## ARTISAN EVENT

Sunday, March 8<sup>th</sup>, Noon-3<sup>pm</sup>

VIETRI®, America's largest importer of handcrafted Italian products for the tabletop, home, and garden, is honored to bring Paolo Crisante to A Southern Season for this exceptional artisan event. Watch Paolo work and see his newest products. VIETRI's co-owner

Susan Gravely will also be on hand to discuss the work and sign pieces along with the artist.