

Nourishing minds as well as bodies

Stephanie Wood just wanted to improve her children's school meals - now she heads a national charity dedicated to educating future generations about food. Paul Kirkley joins its 10th birthday celebration

Shortly after arriving back in the UK from Australia 10 years ago, Stephanie Wood went to look round her children's new primary school. 'It was outstanding,' she recalls. 'But the first thing the school manager said was: "Sorry about the smell - that'll be lunch."'

Wood's children, Matilda and Dexter, had both been born in Australia, and had attended 'a little Montessori nursery on Bondi Beach, where they grew fresh veg and shared it at an outdoor table'. Whatever the foul odour pervading their new school in London that morning, it certainly wasn't fresh veg.

"There was clearly a job to be done," says Wood. But what started off as 'a bit of a mission' to provide better meals in one school eventually grew into School Food Matters - a successful national charity and campaign group that's celebrating its 10th anniversary this month.

A turning point for Wood was meeting Zac Goldsmith, then editor of environmental journal *The Ecologist* and the prospective parliamentary candidate for Richmond Park. 'He said: "Don't stop at your school - why don't you have a go at transforming school meals for the whole borough?" And that's how the charity was born,' explains Wood.

At the time, take-up of school meals across Richmond was 26%. 'It was all going in the bin,' says Wood, now the chief executive of School Food Matters. 'It was so appalling, no one wanted to eat it.'

The campaign received its official launch at the Richmond Theatre in 2008, with broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby in the chair and newly appointed The Great

British Bake Off judge Prue Leith among the speakers.

Initially, School Food Matters met with resistance from the borough council. 'They had a history of serving what they called "a kitchenless solution" - food made in a factory in Wales,' says Wood. 'The best thing in my favour was that I was completely naïve - I knew nothing about the workings of local government. But I'd spent 20 years as a film and television producer, so I went in with the attitude that if there's a problem, we can fix it.'

And fix it they did. After four years of campaigning and 'some pretty impressive

'Understanding where food comes from is as much a life skill as being good at maths'

parent power', the school meals service was relaunched across Richmond (and later neighbouring Kingston), with SFM's caterer partner, ISS Education, providing fresh, nutritious, sustainable food to 35 of the borough's primary schools.

The results were astounding; take-up doubled on average, with some schools now serving meals to more than 80% of pupils. 'And the best thing is it's cheaper!' says Wood. 'The price of meals actually came down.'

Away from the dining hall, School Food Matters has a wider mission to educate children about food and healthy eating.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY! School Food Matters celebrates its 10th year

'I heard one head teacher say the children at his primary school couldn't identify an onion,' says Wood. 'There was no connection at all with the raw ingredients. That's largely down to a whole generation of deskilled parents - the microwave generation. In the UK, we consume more ready meals than any other country in Europe; children were growing up never having seen their parents cook from scratch.'

Getting with the programme

The charity works with a range of partners, including London's Borough Market, Whole Foods Market, Garden Organic and the Royal Horticultural Society, to deliver a series of fun, hands-on food education programmes into schools.

One such scheme is Cooking Ideas, which was born when TV chef Tom Aikens approached the charity and volunteered his services. 'As a chef and a parent, it's something that's close to my heart, making sure kids are eating properly and well,' Aikens tells Weekend. 'And also the education side of it - children knowing how things grow and how it gets into their hands - is really important.'

Another of the charity's successful programmes is Young Marketeers, in which former Blue Peter gardener Chris Collins teaches children the art of growing veg from seed, with the resulting produce sold at Borough Market to help pay for meals for vulnerable families.

'To me, understanding where food comes from, and being able to grow a carrot or a lettuce, is as much a life skill as being good at maths,' says Collins. 'Obviously there are issues around obesity, and the type of foods kids are

eating. But, as a gardener, what I like is that it makes them happy - it's good for their souls.'

Waitrose is another partner the charity has worked with: School Food Matters ran a three-year pilot project encouraging children to grow their own produce and sell it outside Waitrose stores - a scheme that still exists today in the form of Waitrose Grow and Sell.

At any one time, School Food Matters is doing project work with around 100 schools, mostly in the Greater London area. It has also helped shape national policy on school meals. Wood was on the expert panel that contributed to the



CLASS ACTION

Carrot crunchers (above); the birthday cake (left); food fun (right)



Crunch time at Westminster as kids take on carrot challenge

London's Westminster has resonated to the sound of bells, choirs and jeering politicians in its time - but never the noise of 500 children simultaneously biting into a carrot.

Britain's biggest carrot crunch was just one of the ways School Food Matters celebrated its 10th birthday in the College Garden of Westminster Abbey earlier this month.

Buzzing all over this secluded green space, children from 50 schools took part in activities provided by SFM partners, ranging from generating pedal-powered



SMOOTHIE OPERATORS The power of pedalling

smoothies to designing pizzas.

Pupils of Charlton Manor Primary in south London won the picnic competition with their quiche with brown loaf stuffed with ratatouille - all made

with ingredients they'd grown themselves.

Among the VIP guests was MP Zac Goldsmith, while SFM head Stephanie Wood was on hand to cut the 10th birthday carrot (obviously) cake.

Photography: Richard Cannon, Alamy

Fi Glover In my opinion



The BBC Radio 4 journalist airs her views

What have you failed at? How do you react to not being terrifically brilliant at everything? Do you talk about failure easily, or do you lock up all your troubles in the overhead locker of life and hope they don't move about too much in transit?

Many athletes talk of how it is only the act of losing that gives them the incentive to win. If you took that argument apart logically, you'd be forgiven for thinking that not winning was the right medicine for life, but we're not very good at celebrating not winning, are we?

So all hail the newly opened Museum of Failure in Sweden. It's the brainchild of curator Dr Samuel West who hit upon the idea while visiting the Museum of Broken Relationships in Croatia, which contains exhibits of dreadfully sad love letters and possessions from times when other people's love cracked.

But it all gave Dr West his light-bulb moment, which was that it was just as interesting to showcase the stuff that hasn't worked as to glory in the stuff that has. And he's right. Any trip round The Design Museum can be exhausting with its constant 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' as we recognise the beauty of Aviator sunglasses or the

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cleverness of the Starck juicer. These pleasingly successful things tell us how much we like stuff that works. But the Bic For Her (don't get me started), Harley-Davidson Perfume (top notes of climate change, bottom notes of diesel), or Sony's Betamax (why did VHS win that race?), these all have stories worth telling too. The museum's display contains 'over 70 failed products and services from around the world. Every item provides unique insight into the risky business of innovation'. It certainly does.

And Dr West hasn't stopped at static displays - he's also considering some special events. Perhaps a failed gourmet tasting menu from a fancy restaurant, a sampling of bad brews from regional microbreweries, or a world-renowned pianist giving a concert of unpopular music? Book me a ticket to every one! Particularly the first, because I have realised recently I'm happiest in the pub over the road on account of the absurd 'charcoal-infused calves' livers with bee pollen crumb' on offer at some of London's more hipster pop-ups. We certainly have many contributions to make from the UK.

But of course the complete genius of this is that if the Museum of Failure ever closes, that's actually a sign of its total success. Winning? Who needs it?

@ffiglover
Tune in to *The Listening Project*, afternoons on BBC Radio 4

'Jamie Oliver made it easier for us'

It's 12 years since the chef began his campaign to improve Britain's school dinners, in the process sounding the death knell of the infamous Turkey Twizzler - and, says Stephanie Wood, his influence can't be overstated

'The fact Jamie shone his huge light on the issue of school dinners made it so much easier for all of us who went after,' says Stephanie Wood, who has worked with Oliver (below) on numerous occasions over the years. 'He very generously endorsed our campaign. Jamie wants to see this happening - there's no ownership issue with him... he's absolutely thrilled.'

Oliver recently told Weekend he was 'gutted' that the government's Childhood Obesity

Plan did not contain measures such as giving councils the power to ban junk food adverts near schools. And Wood feels the same.

'All of us contributed behind the scenes, and something really exciting and ambitious came forth,' she says. 'But what we were left with is 13 pages of nothing in particular.'

The plan asks the food industry to cut sugar in products popular with children and calls on schools to deliver at least 30 minutes of exercise a day.



For more information, visit schoolfoodmatters.org