

UC San Diego Duo Hopes to Bring Healthy Kids App to the White House

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An online game designed by a married couple at the University of California, San Diego is among the top contenders to win a nationwide competition to build fun but educational "Apps for Healthy Kids." Public voting online began on July 14 and ends at noon this Friday, Aug. 14.

For most of the voting period, Food Buster held a commanding lead as the #1 pick out of a field of 95 apps. The game's creators, Aaron Coleman and Jesica Oratowski-Coleman, are now hoping that Food Buster's combination of game show environment and information about nutrition and exercise will teach players about healthy eating - and put the game over the top when all the votes are counted.

"We think education is very important," said Aaron, a programmer analyst in the Center for Wireless and Population Health Systems (CWPHS), "and games in particular are a really powerful way to educate." CWPHS is based in the UCSD division of the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2).

For More Information: To play "Food Buster," visit the game's website, or vote, (a quick registration is required). Link to all of the finalists in the "Apps for Healthy Kids" competition. The online voting ends at noon Aug. 14.

An example of a Food Buster challenge: Fill your dinner plate with six food items without surpassing 750 calories and busting the scale. The catch: One of those items must be a bacon cheeseburger, a lean-meat quarter-pound hamburger or a turkey pot pie.

Not such an easy proposition, is it? All three items are high in fat and calories, but which one is the healthiest? According to the game's creators, a lean-meat quarter-pounder hamburger is the healthiest of the three options, at 459 calories. And by filling the rest of your plate with spinach, tomato soup, and a salad with non-fat dressing, the meal won't bust the scale (the object of the game).

This is precisely the kind of mealtime critical thinking that Food Buster creators Aaron Coleman and Jesica Oratowski-Coleman are hoping to engender with their online app. The "Apps for Healthy Kids" contest is part of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Lets Move!" campaign to drive children, especially "tweens" (ages 9-12), to eat better and be more physically active.

The ultimate goal: to end childhood obesity within a generation. "We applaud this contest for asking software developers in this country to help with the cause," said Aaron. "But because education is not the only thing we need to do to solve this epidemic, we plan to donate any prize winnings from the popular vote to nonprofits that help illustrate what needs to happen to make kids healthier."

With \$4,500 in prize winnings at stake (along with a trip to the White House), Aaron and Jesica have pledged half of their winnings to the San Diego Victory Gardens (SDVG) for an outdoor education planter box at the Roots at Susie's Organic Farm, which will teach school and community groups about food origins and how to grow food.

The other half of any prize money would go to Long Beach's Centro Shalom, which distributes fresh, local and organic produce to the poor. The center also provides healthy staples to hundreds of families in need and offers classes on nutrition in Spanish for immigrant populations.

"When I'm sitting with teens, a lot of times I try to help them make better decisions in their daily lives," said Jessica, a health educator for "Step Up, Size Down," a CWPHS-affiliated nutrition and physical activity program, funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), that helps teens get to healthy weight.

"I tell them that no matter what, there's always going to be something unhealthy around. It happens all the time, when we go out to eat, when we go to birthday parties.

"But children and teens still need to make the personal choice about what they're going to put into their bodies," she continued. "It's important for them to understand what are healthy foods and what are natural foods, and that's why connecting with land and soil is important."

Aaron and Jessica don't just talk the talk -- they walk the walk as well, as demonstrated by the 150-square-foot vegetable garden they grow in their canyon-side backyard in the Hillcrest neighborhood of San Diego. They planted their plot with the help of the SDVG and now grow a wide variety of vegetables, including squash, corn, okra, tomatoes, cucumbers and even some bee-attracting sunflowers.

If the couple wins the popular vote and gets invited to the White House, they might get a chance to talk shop with the First Lady, who is famous for her efforts to bring vegetable gardening into the mainstream of American life. But they have a few other things they'd like to say, too.

"We're going to thank her for giving app developers a chance to make a positive contribution," noted Aaron.

"And thank her for helping to make school meals healthier for kids," added Jessica.

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