

Cooking Up Change:

The Outdoor Kitchen That Reimagined Prevention

As health professionals and community members grapple with rising rates of childhood obesity, several questions come to the forefront: How much of the obesity epidemic reflects individual choices, and how much is dictated by the systemic breakdown of supports that leave healthy options unaffordable or entirely inaccessible? What happens when anti-hunger efforts are successful in stabilizing food quantity but fundamentally fail to address the core nutrition inequity that drives obesity? How would a community's health trajectory fundamentally shift if families were empowered to reclaim their local food system and exercise their right to feed themselves in ways that are culturally grounded, sustainable, and dignified? These were the questions guiding four Master of Science in Nursing–Entry (MSN-E) students, Danielle Nguyen, Julia Simons, Marina Tamayo, and Francisco Velasquez, who were hand-selected in Fall 2025 for their academic excellence and strong faculty recommendations to complete a life-changing and challenging public health clinical rotation at Lopez Urban Farm located in Pomona, CA.

From their first day, they understood that the journey ahead would require skills and insights far beyond those of traditional clinical practice. It would require them to deconstruct long-held ideas about food, health, and the

systems that shape both. They were challenged to look beyond symptoms and to ask more profound questions about how food systems are constructed, why they function as they do, and how these systems influence the health of individuals, families, communities, and populations across the lifespan.

Their clinical experience at Lopez Urban Farm can be captured through the wisdom of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who reminded us: “We do not want our chains comfortable. We want them removed.” His words illuminated what the students were witnessing: a system that often provides relief, relief from hunger, relief from symptoms, without offering liberation. Relief can fill a stomach for a day. Still, liberation demands more: it requires us to look beyond immediate symptoms and rebuild local food systems as a foundational pillar of disease prevention and health equity. These four students chose to participate in liberation.

At Lopez Urban Farm, the students joined a long-standing movement led by local farmers, community advocates, and families who have worked for years to maintain consistent access to foods that improve health outcomes and reduce susceptibility to diet-related chronic conditions. Together, they explored what it means to advance food sovereignty, whereby communities have the right to access healthy,

MSNE students present their clinical poster at the UrbanKitchen Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony
LEFT TO RIGHT: DANIELLE NGUYEN, FRANCISCO VELASQUEZ, MARINA TAMAYO, AND JULIA SIMONS



Pomona Mayor Tim Sandoval offers his support at the UrbanKitchen ribbon-cutting ceremony.



A coalition of community partners, including local farmers, chefs, a council member, and CGN representatives, attend the UrbanKitchen ribbon-cutting ceremony.

LEFT TO RIGHT: RANDY BEKENDAM, RODNEY HICKS, VICTOR PRECIADO, CHEF MARK



Outdoor community kitchen



Julia Simmons explains the meaning of the UrbanKitchen mural, highlighting the themes of community, nourishment, and collective action.

STUDENTS IN ACTION



Community partners, local leaders, and supporters gather for the UrbanKitchen ribbon-cutting ceremony.

nutritious, and culturally meaningful food that is produced sustainably and aligned with ecological principles. As the students deepened their work, they began envisioning a project to address childhood obesity by tackling the root causes that shape eating habits in Pomona. For students, this work represented an opportunity to participate in a movement that can dismantle food swamps, expand access to nutrient-dense foods, and strengthen the conditions that enable families to thrive.

In collaboration with the Pomona Unified School District and Lopez Urban Farm, Julia, Francisco, Danielle, and Marina transformed a forty-by-twenty-foot plot of land into a vibrant community outdoor kitchen. Guided by the Lopez Urban Farm motto, “We can feed ourselves together,” they sought to create a space in which nourishment, learning, and community action could coexist. Their goal was to make the healthiest dietary choice the easiest, directly confronting the reality of food swamps in which unhealthy eating patterns are aggressively reinforced by abundant, accessible, and heavily marketed low-quality food options.

Over three months, the student team collaborated to design the kitchen's physical layout, plan for the integration of electrical, plumbing, and safety systems, and ensure that the space would be sustainable, functional, and welcoming for community use. Building on this foundation, they developed an eight-week experiential program grounded in the principles of lifestyle medicine. The curriculum blended nutrition education, culinary skill development, and hands-on activities to support confidence, behavior change, and long-term habit formation.

As the space took shape, the students designed a mural that now spans the back wall of the kitchen. Through its imagery, it celebrates the necessary partnership among healthcare providers, farmers, and community members to nourish and sustain the community. The artwork embodies the spirit of the project: collective action, shared responsibility, humanism, accountability, and health equity.

Paul Farmer wrote, “With rare exceptions, all of your most important achievements on this planet will come from working with others, or, in a word, partnership.” The outdoor kitchen is proof of that truth. The UrbanKitchen Project symbolizes the possibilities that emerge when nursing students, families, schools, farmers, and communities collaborate to envision a different future. Pomona now has not only an outdoor community kitchen, but a gathering place where learning, healing, and hope can take root.



Artwork by Danielle Nguyen, Julia Simons, Marina Tamayo, and Francisco Velasquez