

PANEL DISCUSSES “FOOD AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY”

Food is on the table like never before. What we eat, where it comes from, and who we eat with seems never to have been so important. The MARIAL Center recently turned its attention to “Food and the American Family,” bringing together academics and local food experts for a conversation.

The panelists included Emory Psychology Professor Marshall Duke, a faculty fellow at MARIAL and an expert on the importance of family mealtimes. Other speakers were Flo Gentry, who owns and operates Super Suppers Decatur—a national food franchise where busy parents go to assemble family meals in one visit—and Julie Shaffer, an executive at *Edible Atlanta*—a community-based magazine aimed at connecting local food producers with consumers concerned about what they feed their families. Shaffer also is a member of Slow Food Atlanta, which seeks to counter the negative effects of fast food in American culture.

The discussion (online at www.marial.emory.edu) was chaired by Emory anthropologist Peggy Barlett. She is interested in sustainable agriculture and active in the Faculty Green Lunch Group and the Ad Hoc Committee for Environmental Stewardship.

Duke presented findings from two studies and his own research with colleague Robyn Fivush, also a psychology professor and faculty fellow at MARIAL. All the data suggest that children benefit from having regular family meals. They do better in school, are more resilient, and are less likely to smoke, drink, or do drugs. “If you want to make your kids stronger, smarter, happier, and healthier, family meals are the way to do it,” he said, citing a book by Miriam Weinstein called *The Surprising Power of Family Meals*.

Research done by Duke and Fivush suggests that the family stories shared over dinner help children learn appropriate communication, the history of their families, and how to deal with life’s ups and downs. They also learn that they “exist beyond time” when they hear stories about grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives.

Gentry lauded the importance of sharing family meals but said today’s working women often do not have the time to prepare healthy meals after a long day at the office. She described Super Suppers as “your answer to what’s for dinner.” Her meal-assembly kitchen in

Decatur is one of fourteen franchises in metro Atlanta and two hundred nationwide. Clients come for a couple hours once a month and leave with six meals they can freeze and reheat when they like.

Gentry provides the ingredients (already chopped and measured), recipes, and containers. Clients enjoy appetizers, beverages, and the company of others while they put the food together. “It’s like a party when they come here,” she said. Some mothers bring their children and make the meals together. “There’s no shoppin’, no choppin’, no moppin,’” said Gentry.

Most of her clients are women aged thirty to thirty-four who have young children. Many work outside the home. For about \$126, they can put together meals that cost about \$3.50 per serving.

Shaffer said regular family meals are possible with proper planning. “I think it’s about prioritizing your time and committing to doing it,” she said. When her daughter was young, she would cook on the weekend and freeze meals for later in the week. “I believe we’ve been



conned by the media into believing that anything having to do with food preparation is just drudgery and needs to be avoided at all costs,” she said. “Shopping, cooking, chopping. A lot of what we try to do is preserve that tradition by holding feasts and tastings. I think it can be a really pleasant experience to shop for and cook your foods.” Shaffer lamented the loss of family mealtime, noting that as a high school teacher, she “saw the results of that loss” every day with poor behavior from her students.

Barlett noted that the mealtime ritual of passing food dishes around the table also seems to be a thing of the past. “It’s amazing to me how many adults don’t know how to pass the dish,” she said. “People help themselves and put it down.”

MARIAL Center Director Bradd Shore said he looks forward to more panel discussions that feature ordinary people who can talk about struggles, challenges, and triumphs of modern family life. “It is helpful for academics to engage in conversations with people who are deeply connected with aspects of family life in the working world,” Shore said. “They have a lot to teach us.” ■



Julie Shaffer and Peggy Barlett