

How America EatsSM

QSR

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Above and Beyond

A fast-growing juice company reaches out to the field workers.

Many companies implement programs to help their employees, but IZZE Beverage is going one step beyond that. The Boulder,

Colorado juice company created Project REACH, designed to benefit the farm workers in the communities that harvest IZZE's fruit—from apples and blueberries to white grapes.

IZZE is sold at Starbucks, Noodles & Co., Chipotle, Wahoo's Fish Taco, and

BD's Mongolian Barbecue. The company's drinks are also sold nationally at Costco, Target, Safeway, Whole Foods Markets, and other outlets.

People
By Christa Gala

Recently Project REACH, managed by IZZE and the Global Education Fund, donated 9,000 books and learning materials to a variety of organizations in the Yakima

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Valley in Washington State, including medical clinics and after-school programs that serve the migratory population.

IZZE Beverage CEO and president Todd Woloson says the inspiration for Project REACH struck when he and his family were visiting a Honduran banana plantation in 2003. "Here we were in the middle of a fruit-growing community with a socio-economic reality that we could address. Although we don't have banana IZZE, I was fairly confident there was a similar dynamic where we were buying fruit," says Woloson. "That's how we started Project REACH."

Project REACH began in 2004 and in addition to supporting the Yakima Valley Community, it also benefits communities in Augusta, Maine, where most of IZZE's blueberries are picked, and the San Joaquin Valley in California, where IZZE's white grapes are harvested. When Woloson co-founded The IZZE Beverage Company in 2002, he wanted not only to create an all-natural beverage, one free from caffeine, corn syrup and artificial ingredients, he also wanted to contribute to a "higher purpose."

Woloson already had in mind a role model: Alice Waters. Waters operates a café in Berkeley, California, and is widely known for buying from local farmers who support sustainable agriculture. "I'm totally inspired by her, and I think it's a wonderful way to sort of push the industry," says Woloson. "Given the nature of our product and the volume of juice that we buy, it's fairly impractical for us to implement the complete Alice Waters vision, but we can get involved in the communities and get to know the people who are farming and cultivating the fruit that goes into our bottle. What's incredibly rewarding for us is getting to know some of these people who are really inspirational."

Glenn Cassidy is public relations director at Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic in Toppenish, Washington, a beneficiary of Project REACH. The clinic is subsidized through the federal government and provides medical and dental treatments to patients on a sliding fee scale. Cassidy met with Todd Woloson and his wife Eliza, executive director of the Global Education Fund, and invited other area agencies to attend so that the Wolosons could determine the needs of the largely agricultural community. "When the Wolosons came here in January, they had two things in mind," says

Cassidy. "One was to find a supplier for the juice and the other was to identify where their books would go. That's their philosophy, wherever they buy their product from, they give back to that community."

Many children's books went to Safe Haven, an after-school activity center for mostly Hispanic children as well as to the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic. ESL (English as a Second Language) books were delivered to Nuestra Casa, an organization that teaches newly immigrated women how to live in the U.S.

"The kids who hang out at Safe Haven, the distribution point for all the books, they appreciate it because we have it clearly marked who donated the books and also the Wolosons are kind enough to leave a bunch of free juice for the kids," says Cassidy.

One of the challenges of implementing Project REACH, says Woloson, is to stay out of the controversy currently surrounding many immigrants working in the United States.

"From a political standpoint right now, it's a fairly hot topic. We try desperately to avoid engaging ourselves in the political-ness of undocumented workers and realize there are lots and lots of documented workers that are migratory and let's not confuse the issue here," Woloson says. "This is the next wave of immigrants in this country."

The employees at IZZE Beverage do much of the work for Project REACH. They help collect books, pack up the truck, and drive the books where they need to go. With one announcement over the intercom, employees leave their desks to help with whatever's needed. Woloson thinks this hands-on activity helps his employees remember just how IZZE's beverages come to be, a lesson not so easily learned these days.

"In popular culture we don't have any connection to where our food comes from," he says. "It comes from a machine and it's packaged in plastic. We've lost that connection."

Cassidy is grateful for the books his organization receives and hopes IZZE decides to partner with the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic again next year. After meeting Woloson, IZZE is a company he'd like to associate with. "It goes down the line. Everybody's who's participating in this product has the reputation of being a responsible company," Cassidy says.

At the same time, Woloson feels IZZE reaps big benefits from Project REACH as well. In fact, Woloson's travels to the farms in Yakima Valley helped him pinpoint the company's Sparkling Apple drink. "For me personally, as a culinary geek, it's been great to meet the farmers and learn so much more about the nuance between different varieties and strains and the harvest of fruit," says Woloson. "I'm positive having not spent time in the growing community and meeting the farmers and learning about different varieties we would not have come to the same conclusion."

IZZE has had triple-digit growth since it launched its juice beverages in 2002. "I believe that we hit the market at an interesting time when there was a public dialogue about high fructose corn syrup in some traditional soft drinks that opened the door for people to be more interested in a product like IZZE," says Woloson.

Woloson says the company is currently talking with other fast-casual concepts about carrying the IZZE brand, but wouldn't divulge specifics. 