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## Phat Beets kicks off improved farmer's market at Oakland Children's Hospital today

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Photography by Brett Benner. The Phat Beets market and Oakland Children's Hospital.

A local food justice group is ramping up its farmer's market at Children's Hospital & Research Center Oakland with more stands, vouchers for some hospital patients, an innovative produce box program and a demonstration booth by People's Grocery, as well as plans for a nearby community garden in the coming months.

The market will offer two produce stands, J&P Organics and J and J Farms, along with goodies from an Oakland Mediterranean market called Med Food and Berkeley's Vital Vittles Breads and Bakery.

Phat Beets Produce is an all-volunteer effort started by Oaklanders Max Cadji, 29, Dr. Jenifer Matthews, 33, and Brett Benner, 27.

The group started the market last June and has been working to grow the modest Tuesday afternoon venture ever since.

On Apr. 13, visitors to the market will have more fruit and vegetables to choose from, free food samples, food prep demos, free seeds and plants, and other treats.

Cadji, a horticulturist by trade, said he got the idea to start the market several years ago when one of the neighborhood's only grocery shops closed.

He met Matthews not long afterward and the two came up with the idea of a market at the hospital. Matthews works in a teen clinic there, and knew other doctors in the childhood obesity-focused Healthy Hearts Clinic at the medical center. She said she became frustrated when she saw how challenging it was for many hospital patients to follow the advice doctors gave them to eat healthy, because of a dearth of affordable, convenient places to buy fresh food.

Matthews recalls being in her residency at the hospital in 2008 and "getting really depressed talking with families about weight issues."

"We were telling them, "Be healthy, exercise," but I was feeling like I wasn't really connecting with people," she said. "I started looking around the neighborhood and realizing, we're asking people to do something they can't do. There's no safe place to exercise, no place to buy healthy food. There were a lot of barriers."

Along with Benner, the two decided the hospital would be the perfect venue for a new neighborhood farmer's market. That way, patients would have no choice but to walk through the market as they left the hospital. By providing \$5 vouchers, called "carrot cash," to many clinic patients, the trio hoped to make it a little easier to inspire folks to explore healthier food options.

"Now, when we talk to people, we can say, 'These are all the things you're supposed to be eating. You can go outside and pick them out for yourselves,'" Matthews said.

The team also worked to ensure that the market accepted food stamps, as well as vouchers for mothers involved in the state's Women, Infants and Children program.

"Our intention is to make it available to everyone in the neighborhood," said Cadji. "We're trying to bring it into a system that's financially viable."

They're also developing an "experiential booth," he said, working with the East Bay Community Foundation and a grant from Clif Bar to get the project going. The booth will involve simple visual displays on topics such as how far food travels and why soda and candy are cheaper than vegetables. The displays will be interactive, Cadji said, to get people thinking about local food systems and how to lead healthier lives.

"We're really interested in the way people interact with food," Cadji said. "It's the idea of food sovereignty, which is similar to food justice in an urban setting. We want to help people take control of the food system, not just being consumers, but being producers who help shape and benefit from the system."

Cadji said a number of hospitals and clinics have reached out to Phat Beets to learn how to set up similar markets on their properties. And now that Cadji, who used to manage Berkeley's farmers' market, understands how to navigate the complex system, a maze of permits and red tape, he said Phat Beets is more than happy to help.

Though the goal is for the market to be a resource for the whole community, he said, the hospital clinics are central to its mission. The team decided to hold the market on Tuesdays, the same day as the Healthy Hearts Clinic, to make it easier for patients to shop.

Phat Beets is also working with neighbors to create a community garden at 57th and Dover streets, at Dover Street Park. The group plans to hire youth from the teen clinic to run the garden and mentor children from the Healthy Hearts Clinic along the way.

"With so many unhealthy choices available all around us," said co-founder Benner, "we feel it's vital to create healthy options for eating well, and we're trying to re-simplify the formula so it's a choice anyone feels able to make."

He said he continues to draw inspiration from Phat Beets' first project, a youth-run produce stand Wednesdays at St. Martin De Porres Catholic School. As the kids get excited about working the stand and eating fruits and vegetables, their enthusiasm has a ripple effect, and families get drawn into new habits too.

"We want to make healthy lifestyle choices accessible to everyone, and break through the illusion that eating well is difficult and expensive," Benner said. "Farmers' markets bring people and the community together and display the assets present in the community, for the community, by the community."

Visit Phat Beets on Tuesdays at the Children's Hospital, 744 52nd St., and Wednesdays at St. Martin De Porres Catholic School, 675 41st St.

On July 3, Phat Beets will kick off a brand new North Oakland market on Saturdays in the Arlington Medical Center parking lot on 57th and Market streets. It will be a large hybrid farmers' market, flea market and nutrition/healthy eating weekly community space.

Learn more on Phat Beets' Web site .