



It's Alimentary

BENJAMIN PERKINS AND WHOLESOME WAVE MAKE NUTRITION ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

In his role as a community minister at Hope Central Church, a progressive congregation in Boston's culturally diverse and LGBTQ-friendly Jamaica Plain neighborhood, Benjamin Perkins marries his faith to his longstanding commitment to social justice. But he's no abstract theologian—rather, “I consider my spirituality to be very this-worldly,” Perkins says. “I'm not worried about the afterlife. I want to do everything I can in this life to make heaven on Earth.”

That's why, in his professional capacity, Perkins ministers to others in a very material way: He's the newly named CEO of Wholesome Wave, a Connecticut-based national nonprofit that gets nutritious food to those in need. It's the culmination of a career in public health, one that is rooted in HIV/AIDS work but blossomed over the years to encompass any opportunity to heal vulnerable communities by addressing, at the policy level, the systemic disparities that disadvantage them.

“As important as individual-level interventions are, it's at the policy level where you get large-scale impact,” Perkins says. “Over the years I've become more and more committed and resolute about the importance of structural change. If we're going to change things, we've got to look at the systems and policies.”

That understanding makes him a perfect fit to lead Wholesome Wave. Founded in 2007, Wholesome Wave is different than many hunger-fighting, health-enhancing nonprofits. For one thing, the organization

isn't simply concerned with giving folks food to fill their bellies; instead, it specifically focuses on providing access to the kind of wholesome, nutrient-rich foods that encourage people to get and stay healthy. The idea, Perkins says, is to take a preventive approach to care, and help folks avoid the higher rates of heart disease, diabetes and other conditions that are associated with diets filled with lots of processed, preservatives-packed foods. It's alimentary thinking, really.

Of course, all those junk foods tend to be cheaper than the quality fruits, veggies and other nourishing items that Wholesome Wave helps to put on kitchen tables across the country. And that's why Perkins plans to fortify and expand the organization's efforts to reach communities of color, LGBTQ people, and other groups who contend with multiple layers of oppression that make finding and affording healthy food even harder.

Although these efforts are even more vital in the wake of COVID-19, a pandemic that underscored and exacerbated health disparities that have existed for a very long time, Perkins is hardly new to putting his whole heart and soul into crucial work like this. He found himself entering the public health sphere in the '90s, after his childhood best friend died of AIDS. Perkins, who wrestled with his sexuality while growing up in a family steeped in the Black Baptist church, came out as gay and eventually found himself doing outreach for the Provincetown

[ABOVE, LEFT] Benjamin Perkins

[ABOVE] PHOTO @wholesomewave

AIDS Support Group, passing out condoms and safer sex info while dressed in drag in the dunes and along Commercial Street.

Before long, Perkins wound up serving in a number of high-level management roles at the LGBTQ-focused Fenway Institute. He was also founding director of the MALE Center, a notable community and wellness center for gay and bisexual men in Boston's South End. Most recently, Perkins spent six years in vice president roles at the American Heart Association—but wherever he went, he brought with him an acute understanding of the underlying conditions that make some populations more prone to poor health than others.

Now that he's riding into a new role at Wholesome Wave, Perkins plans to expand on the organization's already innovative work. Among other things, Wholesome Wave pioneered a program that sees doctors write prescriptions for qualifying patients to receive free produce, and developed an initiative that allows consumers to double the value of SNAP benefits when purchasing produce at grocery stores and farmers' markets. Looking ahead, Perkins says that Wholesome Wave will continue to think holistically about health and nutrition while making the fight for equity even more central to its mission.

“Everything goes back to paying attention to asking a few things,” Perkins explains. “Who's on the margins? What are their barriers to access? And what are we doing to remove those barriers?” [x]

wholesomewave.org