

NJEHA

Creativity Story

“Humble Inspiration”

It became evident that this was going to be another big mess. Unlabeled nuts. A package of some dried, twisted root with no English writing. A container of flour lacking allergen information. Typical packaged food misbranding that is rampant in stores nationwide, but seems especially prevalent in ethnic specialty stores. The man in charge struck me as a hard working immigrant, not short, not tall, but slender, and as humble as a bean. His particular accent and dark black skin indicated he was of African origin. I asked him where he stored his fish. He led me to the rear of the grocery store where a reach-in refrigerator and two small deep freezer units were situated. The dried fish in the refrigerator had no labels, and appeared to be un-eviscerated. The frozen fish packages also had no labels. When asked, the humble store owner said that he bought his frozen fish from a market in Philadelphia. He stated that he bought the dried fish “from a friend.” However, he could not produce any invoices. Unknown source, hmm. Clearly, his entire stock of dried and frozen fish was bound for voluntary destruction.

When I vocalized this to him, he backed himself into a corner, crouched down into a squat, covered his face with his hands, and began to sob dramatically. “You’re taking food from my children,” he cried. “I am a very poor man – why are you doing this to me?” Whatever. It was his responsibility to know and apply the rules and regulations, I thought. Not doing so compromises public health. But my humanity suddenly intervened, as humanity annoyingly does at the most inconvenient moments. His raw emotion stung me. Would I really be responsible for starving his children? This hard working man’s livelihood hung in jeopardy, and he could not understand what he did wrong.

As I contemplated how to handle this situation, I realized that I had a unique opportunity to impact this man’s life in a positive way. To preserve his dignity and his livelihood. To keep food in his children’s stomachs. To protect public health at the same time. I would empower him and all the immigrants who owned food businesses. In fact, I would empower anyone who had trouble understanding the complexities of food label requirements.

In the next two months, I pored over endless FDA, USDA, and Customs food labeling and import laws. Hundreds of pages of mind-bending, confusing regulations. I also attended a food labeling workshop. I then created a 3-page, plain language poster and guide summarizing and simplifying the laws applicable to packaged food labeling. During the whole process, I kept the humble store owner in my thoughts, allowing his lack of understanding to shape my work. I kept thinking, “How can I write this so that others like him can understand it?”

I called the finished product “Parts of a Food Label.” This educational material has been distributed statewide. It has been promoted to local health departments, the food industry, and food safety organizations. Inspectors across New Jersey have handed it out to restaurants, grocery stores, and food manufacturers. Much positive feedback has been received. I accept it graciously, but I know the real

truth. The appreciation does not belong to me at all. It belongs to a humble bean of a man who unknowingly provided me with great inspiration. And who was of course, the first individual to receive his very own copy of "Parts of a Food Label."

~ Virginia Wheatley, New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services