

Broccoli Backers

President's Gripe Sends Syracusan To White House

By ALVA J. JAMES
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Edward Downes has given broccoli a lot of credit over the years.

The vegetable, he said, was part of a "clean-your-plate" exercise that his mother used to help him develop into a healthy human being. And it was part of a diet he claims is responsible for his success in finishing the 1983 Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, D.C.

But Downes, a native of Syracuse now living in Washington, said he never thought the vegetable had the power to put him on the White House lawn with Barbara Bush.

It wasn't until George Bush admitted that he hates the stuff that Downes got his break.

As a representative for the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, Downes was able to bask in national publicity as part of a group that delivered to Barbara Bush three cases of the vegetable March 25. The association also distributed about 10 tons of the vegetable to food banks throughout the capital's metropolitan area.

"You can't really believe it's happening until Millie the dog walks in, and then Barbara Bush walks in," Downes said while visiting his parents in Syracuse Sunday. "When you leave home to go to the big city, you wouldn't think something like broccoli would get you on worldwide television.

Now Downes has a deeper respect for the vegetable.

"I went to a salad bar (Saturday), and the first thing I had was broccoli," he said. "I really felt good about it."

Downes' parents, who live on Onondaga Hill, said they watched as CNN flashed their son's face across the screen every hour.

"Eddie called home and told us he had a date with Mrs. Bush, but then it turned out to be a broccoli date, and we laughed about the whole thing," said his father, John, former director of the Gifford Foundation. "It was fun to see him on television."

His sister, JoAnne, principal of Pere Le Moyne Elementary School in Syracuse, taped the event on her video recorder. She

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confirmed that her brother has always liked broccoli.

"He had a problem with carrots, but as I recall broccoli was something he could always go for."

Downes, 29, grew up on Syracuse's east side with his seven sisters. He attended Our Lady of Solace Grammar School.

"I want to tell the nuns over there that if they didn't promote such a strict education I wouldn't have made it on CNN," he said. "I'm sure during the nine years there, we were encouraged to eat our vegetables and say our prayers."

A 1979 graduate of Bishop Grimes High School, Downes graduated from St. Bonaventure University in 1983. That year he left Syracuse to serve as an intern for former Rep. George Wortley.

He began working for the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, a trade organization for produce industries, a year and half ago after working for two years as a personnel specialist on Capitol Hill and graduating from George Mason University with a master's degree in public administration.

Downes said his association responded to the president's remarks at the request of a broccoli growing company in Southern California.

Association members who went to the White House wore broccoli-boutonnieres and presented Barbara Bush with a broccoli bouquet.