



New project teaching culinary skills to homeless launches

Sep 30, 2019 08:35 pm

LAHIA takes on new project to teach culinary skills to homeless

Since its inception in 2007, Love and Hope in Action, better known locally as LAHIA, has served thousands of meals to homeless and/or indigent adults and families in Martin County.

Now, the Stuart-based non-profit organization on Salerno Road is taking that a step further with its inaugural LAHIA Culinary Pathway program, where clients will learn culinary techniques to pursue a career in food service.

"I am super-excited about this," said Chef Carla O'Donnell, who will oversee daily lessons in the LAHIA kitchen. "It is a dream come true for me."

The hands-on, tuition-free culinary training program kicks off Oct. 7, lasting for nine weeks through the second week in December, running Mondays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. At most, each session will have six students, and are primarily those clients already within the LAHIA community, O'Donnell said.

As part of graduation, students will receive ServSafe Certification, a national program for anyone with a career in food service. They also will go out with completed, updated resumes and the possibility of landing a job—or at least an interview—in the culinary field.

The next session would then start in January. Tuition is free because of generous donations that help to offset the \$100,000 annual budget for the course, O'Donnell said.

The small class size is "because I want to be sure that all the students have hands-on attention," O'Donnell said. One student would be selected as a helper to oversee a class if O'Donnell was unable to teach one day, she said.

The course, based on the model program from Waukegan, Ill., and designed by an executive chef trained at Culinary Institute of America, will cover basic kitchen skills, food sanitation and proper handling. Various styles of cuisine – French, Jamaican, Italian, Southern, New Orleans, Texan, Cajun and Mexican, among others – will be taught.

The ultimate goal is to place about 25-30 students annually in culinary careers, such as in restaurants, hospitals, catering, schools and hotels.

O'Donnell, who has worked at LAHIA since last October, is a 2002 graduate of the Florida Culinary Institute in West Palm Beach, having studied there for three years. She also gives one-on-one cooking classes, through her business, A Culinary Caper, which also provides personal chef services and catering.

O'Donnell got the idea for the Culinary Pathway Program at LAHIA once the kitchen renovations were finished, she said.

Brenda Dickerson, LAHIA executive director, eagerly endorsed O'Donnell's plan. "She said that it was a waste for such a beautiful kitchen to set part of the day unused," Dickerson said.

The money for renovations came from donors and from a \$100,000 state grant, Dickerson said.

Requirements for being accepted into the program are very strict, Yvette Gregory, LAHIA director of client services, explained. The prospective students must be entitled to work in this country, have a current driver's license or passport, and a Social Security card before they apply.

Attitude also counts for a lot, Gregory added.

"They must be eager (to learn), to step up and improve their lives," Gregory said. "There could be folks who have had some bum luck in their lives, and this is what they need to get back to work. It's for somebody who really wants it, rather than just for a lark."

Some of the food prepared could be part of the daily LAHIA meals, O'Donnell said.

LAHIA offers hot breakfasts from 9 to 10 a.m., and dinners from 5 to 6 p.m., Mondays through Fridays. On Saturdays, a continental breakfast is available at 9 a.m., and a lunch is served from 1 to 2 p.m. Meals are free, but donations are welcome.

Between 55-70 people partake of the meals each day, Dickerson said. From January to July this year, "about 320 brand-new people have come through our doors who are not necessarily homeless but are in need of assistance," she said.

—*Jeff Alexander, Special to Martin County Currents*