

## Community Kitchen cooks up culinary careers

BY BETTY DILLARD

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Chester Lee is fired up.

The 23-year-old gospel rapper from the impoverished Stop Six community in Fort Worth lost his job, his family and his hope, and had turned to the streets. While he was working in the kitchen at the Salvation Army and “thinking about how I could help others who have less than I have,” Lee heard about cooking classes for low-income students offered through the Tarrant Area Food Bank’s Community Kitchen and signed up.

Lee is among 11 students who recently completed the food bank’s 14-week job-training course in food preparation and service. The program includes life-skills training and case management through a contract with the Women’s Center of Tarrant County. Students in class seven are wrapping up a two-week internship and will graduate May 30 with a culinary passport to what is hoped will be permanent job placement in the food service and hospitality industries.

“I want to be a good example for this program,” Lee said. “If I hadn’t come here I’d be way out in left field. It’s taught me how to cook and how to make myself better in life, how to treat myself and others. Everybody deserves a second chance.”

**The Community Kitchen program** is all about fresh starts. Twenty years ago in Washington, D.C., the program began, and was later adopted by Feeding America. The nationwide program uses professional chefs who train unemployed and low-income adults in food rescue and meal preparation. The students turn surplus food donated by grocery stores and restaurants into meals that are then distributed to the food bank’s partner hunger-relief charities.

The local program was launched in January 2007 at the East Fort Worth Montessori Academy. Growing demand and the need for more space resulted in a cutting-edge, 2,400-square-foot commercially-equipped production kitchen and classroom that opened in February at the food bank’s Cullen Street warehouse.

Nationwide, the Community Kitchen program graduates more than 600 students each year and boasts a 58 percent job retention rate during six months, according to Feeding America. Tarrant Area Food Bank’s culinary training program – class eight began May 18 – has now turned out 48 students.

“Having the Community Kitchen here is a great asset now because people who come to the kitchen get to tour the entire facility. The program is making people more aware of all our programs, the rescued food and the growing need for donations as well as job training,” said Andrea Helms, Tarrant Area Food Bank communications director.

**Culinary employment** is the front burner of the program that Chef Vedat Lika calls “a mini-boot camp for cooking.”

A product of a professional culinary family from Long Island, Lika has more than 30 years experience in cooking, managing restaurants, planning menus, and training and supervising cooks. He opened his own restaurant in Manhattan in 1981 when he was only 24, and has catering and banquet experience from kitchens all across the United States.

“This is the best job I’ve ever had. As chefs, we’re always teaching as we cook. This is a win-win for students and the food bank, and for me because I love to cook and teach,” Lika said.

Lika combines basic lessons in meal preparation with how a real restaurant operates so that his students will be able to transition from their internships into quick employment.

“One of the main things we do is teach them how to cook at home,” Lika said. “They learn how to cook healthy and eat healthy and how to shop for nutritious food. They can use that wherever they find employment. But they also go home and teach that to their families,” he said. “What’s nice about this program is that they take home what they’ve learned so it affects a lot more people.”

Lylette Pharr, Community Kitchen administrator, said the goal is for students to prepare 150 meals a day by the end of June and 10,000 meals by the end of the year. She said the food bank tries to place each student, and is always looking for additional employment venues – particularly country clubs and hotels – as well as guest chefs to lecture.

“We’re trying to help place them where they’ll get a decent wage and job opportunities,” Pharr said. “I always tell them to use the internship as a steppingstone. To me, the internship is valuable added training, a way to continue building skills and knowledge but most of all a good way to build their confidence.”

**Among the providers of internships** – sometimes referred to as “externships” – for the seventh class are JPS Health Network, Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital Fort Worth, Zorro’s, La Playa Maya, Drew’s Place and Ultimate Cuisine Catering.

Lee and two of his classmates are interning under the tutelage of Chef Michael Morabito at Fort Worth’s Colonial Country Club. Morabito took Catherine Davis from the first Community Kitchen class. She’s now the lead garde manger, the chef responsible for the preparation of cold food, the salads, fruits and cheeses.

“I’m always looking for that new bright shining star,” Morabito said. “It’s competitive for them but if they’re really hungry and can make a splash really quick ... we’re hoping to give them a shot in this business.

“I love programs like this and I’m always happy to help out the food bank,” Morabito said. “We hope to set the standard for the rest of the nation. I want to have a reputation for creating a culture where Colonial is the culinary centerpiece for programs like this.”

Lee can’t believe his luck at landing an internship at Colonial, especially since it’s just in time for the Crowne Plaza Invitational at Colonial May 25-31. If he doesn’t get a permanent position there or somewhere else in the food service industry Lee said he may go back to college.

“I know I can make a stand,” Lee said. “I can do anything now.”

Fellow classmate Tanya Davis, 44, shared Lee’s optimism for the future. In and out of prison three times, Davis said she is hoping to get a culinary position and save up some money so she can open a bed and breakfast business in East Texas.

“This program’s given me a new hope in life, a second chance to better myself,” Davis said. “I can prove to myself I can turn my life around and go in the right direction. I care more about life now and about others. It’s a good feeling.”