

Marietta Daily Journal

October 13, 2005

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Art & Food instructor Julie Rimberia, center, instructs students, from left, Teresa Stone, Kathleen Greun and Minnie Cupp as they make garlic bread when The Kroger School of Cooking visited the program a couple of weeks ago.

Sharpening their skills



Story by Karen Mortensen ■ Marietta Daily Journal ■ Photos by Bret Gerbe

Art & Food offers disabled a chance to increase quality of life through cooking

Madeline Petrone, 29, is proud of her heritage. Other than her characteristic dark hair and eyes, her European descent is also noticeable in her love for cooking and all things pasta.

"I'm Italian," she said, beaming. "My mom likes to cook, too." Ms. Petrone, a Marietta resident, only gets to prepare her favorite dishes with her mother on the weekends, though. While her weekday residence is a local group home for adults with developmental disabilities, she seems to truly live at Art & Food, where she learns more recipes she can practice with her mom.

Based in Marietta, Art & Food falls under the umbrella of Georgia Community Support and Solutions, which offers services for mentally disabled adults and at-risk adolescents. The program is operated in New Market Center on Lower Roswell Road, and contains a vibrant art studio on one side and a restaurant-sized kitchen on the other. These resources help teach people like Ms. Petrone basic skills they can apply in the job market or simply to increase quality of life.

Art & Food director Thomas Shibley founded the two-tiered program in 2003, hoping to initially draw

interest with one of the aspects and from there extract hidden talents in students.

"The food and art part of this increases so many other skills in life, like concentration," Shibley said.

For Ms. Petrone, who's been involved with the program since July, it was a chance to take her love of food and develop it into a stimulating, interactive activity. In fact, she can't quit talking about when chefs from the Kroger School of Cooking visited Art & Food a couple weeks ago to share their skills with the class.

"I helped the chefs make salad and garlic bread, and they showed us how to hold our hands with the knife so we won't get cut," she said, motioning the correct way to hold the utensil.

Having culinary experts from the community volunteer their time to Art & Food is a major foundation of the program, Shibley said, but a permanent staff is also there to build trust with students and supervise each activity — but not be over-bearing.

"We try to fade staff reliance so they can do it alone," he added. "That's even more exciting for them, to be able to do it independently."



Kroger cooking school Chef Stephanie Smithmyer, left, helps Art & Food student Kathleen Greun cut garlic bread. Culinary experts from the area volunteer to teach the program's students cooking skills.

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Banakayi Tshifunda, 22, of Chamblee, whose students call her "Bonnie," has been a program instructor for two months now, but said she's worked with developmentally disabled people for years. Every Monday, she explained that students draw a different recipe from a hat, polish culinary skills all week and put knowledge to the test on Thursday, when they cook the recipe.

Recently, she introduced her family recipe of fried chicken to the class.

"We really try to let them be individuals and independent," she said. "It makes them feel good ... but at the

same time, we let them know we are here for support."

Along with learning to cook, Ms. Tshifunda said the adults learn basic measuring, ingredients, safety and cleanliness in the kitchen. They have to follow guidelines that mirror those of any full-service restaurant or catering company.

"For most of them, it's a pretty new experience," Shibley added. "... They don't just get to dabble in it ... they can actually progress and get better and better."

And what level they want to reach is at their discretion, depending how often they visit the studio. Ms. Petrone attends Art & Food from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. five days a week, but Shibley said every participant has a different schedule based on

current work schedules, availability of transportation and interest.

"They don't have to come every day ... it can be something to enhance what they already have going on in their every day life," he continued.

While some students privately pay to attend Art & Food, they may also qualify for a Medicaid waiver through the state. A large portion of income for the program is also generated by students themselves — an actual catering business is run from the studio's kitchen.

Shibley said companies and private parties hire them for small jobs, such as office lunches and family reunions.

"(The students) can work at a certain pace and see

what it's like to have a real job and a deadline," he explained.

Also, some of the arts and crafts created by students are sold in venues throughout the area, and they receive a commission for

what they sell.

With about 36 adults currently involved in Art & Food, it's no secret more challenges may arise than in a "normal" day program. But mostly, Ms. Tshifunda said the hard part is getting

students to realize their full potential.

"If you see, none of us are stressed out," she continued. "These people bring such a light and joy. It really takes you to another level."

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