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Cobb

The art of learning

Disabled adults taught needed skills in east Cobb

By YOLANDA RODRIGUEZ
yrodriguez@ajc.com

Two cheesecakes are in the oven. Plastic gloves are on. Aprons are adjusted.

An electric mixer is spinning, and people are falling into place.

An assembly line is taking shape. Students are ready to fill containers with poppy seed rolls stuffed with romaine lettuce, tomatoes and slices of roast beef.

Welcome to Art & Food.

The art part — the hand-painted Christmas ornaments, the fish painting, the flower painting, the quilts, Christmas stockings and pillows — are in the front of the store in a busy east Cobb shopping center.

The food part is more than a cooking lesson.

Instructors are teaching developmentally disabled adults skills they can use in the world.

On a recent afternoon instructors helped students focus on the tasks at hand: filling an order for sandwiches, potato salad and brownies for a group of 50, which would be delivered later that day, and preparing baked goods for an open house that the students would host that night.

While instructor Julia Rimerberia led Judy Platek through the sandwich assembly line, Lawanda Myricks taught Minnie Cupp and others the fine art of grating lemon peel.

Despite the din around them, Marlie Lamour helped Holly Cutcliff focus on their mission: icing a pineapple upside-down cake.

Lamour took Cutcliff's left hand in hers and guided the young woman as she squeezed pink icing out of a decorator's bag.

Cutcliff, 26, was eager to try it on her own.

"I want to see if I can do it," she said.

Lamour let go, guiding instead with words.

"Remember you've got to provide



Marlie Lamour (back) guides Holly Cutcliff as she learns to ice a pineapple upside-down cake at Art & Food. The program also teaches students how to create and market artwork.

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the pressure, Lamour said, turning the plate for Cutcliff. "Don't take it too close to the cake."

The icing oozed out in swirls that lined the cake's edges.

"The more pressure you put, the nicer it looks," Lamour said.

Cutcliff pulled the bag away, and some of her handiwork came undone.

"I'm messing up on this," she said.

"No," Lamour said. "You are doing fine."

Skills for better jobs

Art & Food is a program of Georgia Community Support and Solutions, a nonprofit group that has programs for people with developmental disabilities and adolescents who have been involved in the justice system.

In February 2003, Art & Food opened in the New Market Center on Lower Roswell Road. It is the brainchild of program director Thomas E. Shibley, whose family has been in the restaurant business for generations. He worked at similar programs in San Francisco, but this is the first time he has had the two components under one roof.

Some participants pay a fee to attend the program, but most of the funding comes through Medicaid. Donations and income from art sales and the catering jobs also help run the program.

The program's goal is to teach developmentally disabled adults the skills that will lead to employment beyond the entry-level jobs they often get.

The storefront also gives the program the kind of community visibility that Shibley wants. The East Marietta branch of the Cobb County Library and Sewell Park are across the street.

Faith Lutheran Church and School is also across the street. Platek works there several hours a week, distributing lunch to the children and helping with the cleanup. She got the job with the help of Art & Food.

Platek, who lives with her brother and a roommate in east Cobb, said she likes "helping with the cooking" at Art & Food.

Untapped artistic talent

The art gallery is awash in sunlight. The light bounces off the green, orange and beige tiles and shines on the paintings that line the walls.

For every piece of art sold, the artist gets 50 percent of the sale price. The rest of the money goes back into the program, which provides the participants with all of the materials for their work.

Behind the gallery wall, the space is divided between the commercial kitchen, which is set up like a restaurant's kitchen, with several sinks for washing hands, food preparation areas and sinks for washing dishes, and an industrial-strength gas stove.

For many participants, the experience is new.

"Some might have had some basic art in school," said Shibley, the director whose easy laugh and enthusiasm suffices the space.

"And some might have a specific talent. We have some people that are just really talented, and they never really got to express it. So we are trying to find those talents. A lot of them don't really have it all, but we work hand-over-hand with them."

Volunteer Laura Davenport goes to the art center on Tuesdays to teach participants how to make quilts — cutting and measuring and using a sewing machine.

"She works one square at a time with them," Shibley said. "Some people can't do any of it. Some people can only do one thing on it. Some people can only lay out all the squares and help us put it together."

The artists have displayed their work — and sold some pieces — at several locations, including shows at the Whole Foods Market on Briarcliff Road, Jake's Ice Cream in Midtown during the Dogwood Festival, the Roswell Street Fair in Roswell and the YMCA on East Piedmont Road.

"We are trying to show



Photos by ANDY SHARP / Site



Ashley Davis (above) helps to assemble sandwiches, while Judy Platek (left) displays her painting. Proceeds from catering and art sales help support the program.

Department. Participants also keep an eye on supplies and help order needed items. They accept deliveries and put away the goods.

Classes also develop life skills — getting along with neighbors and handling money — because many participants live on their own in special residential programs.

"The main thing that I want them to do is experience things that they never got to experience," Shibley said.

"I want them to take a few risks ... to let them achieve goals, to step out and try new things."

them how the art world works," Shibley said. "We put them out there in shows. We have exhibits. We cater to the public. We try to go to art galleries at least once a week so they can see how others exhibit their work."

'We can do it'

On the food side, participants have worked on several catering projects, including the recent sandwich job for the Tommy Nobis Center.

They've also catered family reunions and a 200-person breakfast for Families First in Atlanta.

"We try to give a much better deal, because we are learning," Shibley said. "If we have the recipe, we could do it. It might not be like the chef at the Ritz-Carlton, but we can do it."

Shibley said the catering training is intensive. In the kitchen, students learn how to keep the food preparation areas clean, get along with co-workers, listen and follow instructions, and maintain good food quality.

The kitchen is inspected by the Cobb County Health