

For homeless, a stirring of hope

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By Karen Avenoso

Yvette Smith is not your typical cooking-school star – this 27-year-old Brooklyn woman didn't have a stove (or a shower or a bed) until three weeks ago. Like many aspiring young chefs, Smith dropped out of school to enter the restaurant business. But rather than simmering and sautéing at Montrachet, she wiped tables at McDonald's. Later, she left work to cook meals in her own kitchen. Then her abusive husband kicked her out.

Today, the arm Smith chops and stirs with shows how far food has brought her. As a participant in a 24-week [culinary-arts training program](#) for homeless women, Smith cooks in the basement kitchen of the Third St. Men's Shelter. Rolling up a starched white sleeve, she reveals an ugly black scar.

"It was my birthday, and my husband threw a really wild party," Smith says, adding that she was too drunk to duck the stray bullet that crashed through the window.

This holiday season, though, has brought happier times. After two months of living in friends' crowded apartments, Smith has an SRO of her own. She's back at McDonald's dressing burgers this time. Last Thursday, Smith served her family a bountiful banquet of turkey, shepherd's pie and oatmeal cookies – all learned in the shelter kitchen. On Dec. 28 she will address her graduating class.

Smith's success story is as much about self-help as home cooking, according to Barry Ruff, whose non-profit organization, the Manhattan Bowery Corporation, runs the 1 ½-year old program with funding from the city's Department of Employment. "Cooking is just a means to an end. The ideal is to give people dignity, by getting them jobs and, ultimately, housing."

So WHY use spoons and spatulas rather than schoolbooks or sewing machines?

"It's a reasonably accessible route to the world of work," Ruff says. "It requires skills that are teachable within a limited period of time. And given the plethora of restaurants in New York City – from Le Cirque down to Kentucky Fried Chicken – we knew there were a lot of ways to get these women jobs."

Recipes also teach life skills, says chef/trainer Barbara Hughes. "Here, dicing carrots is about working together. Making a dish is about a whole work ethic. Just to bake something, have it come out right and show it to people can do a lot for self-esteem."

To date, the program has had 40 graduates. All were residence of the Lexington Ave. Armory Shelter for Women when they enrolled. Now some have homes.

Though most of the graduates are employed by catering companies, hospitals, nursing facilities, and restaurants, finding work was not easy.

"Professional kitchens are hard for any woman – especially a minority woman – without the stigma of being homeless," says Josh Wallack who does job development for the program. "People make the assumption that these women aren't skilled, that they can't get work on time or get along with other people, that there's something wrong with them or they wouldn't be homeless."

The culinary training program tries to combat these stereotypes by proving them wrong.

Hughes, a former restaurant chef, spices her lesson with laughter and love. "It's better than any job I've ever had," she says. "I get to cook, to teach, to give something major back. I do a lot of nurturing, caring and building self-esteem."

And such commitment seems to pay off. Early on a Thursday morning, 30 women in double-breasted chef's coats are diligently slicing and dicing. Beneath racks of gleaming pots and pans, they chatter amiably and trade technical advice. They bake 20-dozen buttery cookies – served to that day's special guest speaker, and moist and sweet enough to sate the choosiest chocoholic. They toss salad, layer lasagna and baste turkeys – sold, at cost, to a Human Resources Administration conference off-site.

Halfway through class, a glamorous African-American woman sweeps into the metal-and-chrome kitchen. Lola Bell, owner of Lola-belle's restaurant and that day's guest speaker, had gotten lost on her

way downtown. But any gap between well-coiffed role model and uniformed students is quickly bridged with talk of sexism, racism and cooking.

“No one of us is better than any other one,” Bell begins her sermon. “If my check doesn’t come in, I would be on the street, too.”

The women listen raptly while Bell serves up Bible psalms and other uplifting messages: “You all are entrepreneurs. I don’t care if you know how to spell that.

“We each have gifts and more importantly, we each have dreams. Your anger is justified, but you have to find some peace with it. You have to find a way of keeping your dreams alive.”

When Bell tells her own success story – her first restaurant, her stint at the French Culinary Institute, the joys of schmoozing – the audience nods and giggles.

Then a woman in a hairnet and a paper visor looks at the successful restaurateur in her caramel-colored suit and thrusts up her hand. “So how do *we* get started? How does someone like me get my foot in the door? What do you look for when you hire?”

For a moment, Bell is caught off-guard. Then she gets serious and stern. “You need a food attitude. Be punctual. Never make excuses for being wrong. You may have to start out by pleading with some restaurant owner and offering your services for free.”

“Amen,” says someone in a folding chair – someone who a decade ago, did not need this advice. But Florence Jackson is jobless now. During a long period of drug abuse, she also lost her home and her kids. The 41-year-old woman praises the culinary-arts program. “I’ve learned to chop quickly, make sauces with herbs, get along better with people. I relearned dishes that, after the drugs, I’d pretty much forgotten.”

These days, she dreams about a “little kitchen on wheels” and a home big enough for her and her two kids. “My son has this idea about a good recipe for life,” says Jackson, “education, then a job, then kids. I did it backwards. I want to do it the right way now.”