

City Beat: On chopping block

Chef training for homeless in fiscal peril

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It's a successful program that has taken hundreds of people off the street and trained them in a skill that allowed them to support themselves and their families.

And, of course, it's in trouble.

Project Renewal's Culinary Arts Training Program could be history by the middle of 2005 unless the nonprofit agency finds \$500,000 to replace funds it lost because of cuts by the Housing and Urban Development Department.

That means the agency - which offers homeless people housing, jobs and the outreach needed to rebuild their lives - will have to close the program in the cavernous basement kitchen of its 8 E. Third St. shelter in Manhattan.

Project Renewal officials said 86% of the estimated 500 graduates who completed the training program since its 1995 inception have found jobs.

"We can't close our doors," said Stephanie Cowles, Project Renewal's associate director. "It would not make sense. This program allows 160 people a year to learn the skills they need to find their way off the welfare rolls. The only requirement is that they are motivated and are willing to learn.

"There are not a lot of training programs like ours out there," Cowles said.

Project Renewal's clients have become homeless for many different reasons, from drug abuse to mental illness to just plain bad luck. The group offers a variety of programs, from a mobile medical outreach unit, a clinic on wheels that provides health screening and treatment at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, to its Parole Support and Treatment Program, which helps recently released mentally ill prisoners find transitional housing.

The Culinary Arts Training Program operates four hours a day, five days a week, over three months.

Executive chef Barbara Hughes said the course teaches students all the skills they need to find entry-level work in corporate kitchens around town.

That includes food preparation, such as cutting and mixing ingredients, and maintaining a salad bar. Responsibilities increase as skills improve.



Hands Schuh NEWS

Students in the Culinary Arts Training Program of Project Renewal are attentive as C.L. Calhoun demonstrates slicing techniques.

Chef John Peeler said instruction goes far beyond learning simple knife and service skills.

"A lot of it is palate development, exposing them to foods they have never had before," Peeler said. "We spent one class learning the difference between five kinds of mushrooms."

"These are people who want to learn, and our goal is to get them job ready," he said. "When they get a job, that's the real commencement."

Hughes said 56% of graduates who are hired are still working a year later.

Student Wendy Dudley, 40, of Manhattan hopes her training will land her a job that will be the first step in opening her own soul food restaurant.

"My uncle Phillip used to be a chef," Dudley said. "I like learning the different kinds cooking and just learning something new."

Linda Tripp, 30, of Brooklyn, a mother of three, joined after hearing about the culinary program from a counselor in the homeless shelter where she lived for several months.

"This is a wonderful program and it would be a shame if it closed," Tripp said. "I'm a young mother trying to get my life back on track. It would hurt a lot of people not to have this anymore."

Lee Nelson found his salvation in petits fours.

The Augusta, Ga., native fell into drugs when he arrived in Newark three years ago. He kicked his habit through Project Renewal's drug treatment program.

"I did it cold turkey upstairs," Nelson said with a proud grin. Then he found the culinary program perfect for his needs.

After graduation, he got work at One If By Land, Two If By Sea in the West Village, working his way up to where he is creating tasty desserts in the popular restaurant.

"You can accomplish anything if you put in the effort," Nelson said. "I've worked there two years and have not missed a day and don't plan to miss a day."

"Now I want to train to be a pastry chef," Nelson said, "maybe open my own dessert shop. And I'm going to do it, too."

Bill of fare

To learn more about Project Renewal's programs for the homeless, call (212) 620-0340 or visit the organization's Web site, www.projectrenewal.org