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This is why a culinary arts program is taking place inside a maximum security prison

Correctional facility's culinary program an effort to redirect inmates' lives

By Paula Ann Mitchell, Daily Freeman

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NAPANOCH >> Behind the imposing fortress, a group of men hustles in the kitchen, making the best of a bad situation.

White uniforms take the place of jumpsuits, and their space is abuzz with the sounds of banging pots, banter and background oldies music.

They jive a bit, crack a few jokes and smile faintly as they go about their business, but mostly, their work is serious stuff—the kind that gives them a sense of purpose.

Head cook Tyrell Oliver, a burly guy who towers above the others, spreads cooking oil evenly over the grill and then turns to his right to place the batter-dipped sandwich onto it.

Like the other 13 inmates in the culinary arts program at Eastern Correctional Facility, Oliver takes pride in his work as he prepares lunch for the employees at the maximum-security state prison, the sixth oldest in New York.

The Monte Cristo he lifts off the grill is one of the alternatives on the menu for the staff that doesn't observe Ash Wednesday, the day a Freeman reporter and photographer visited.

All the same, there are plenty of fish filets sizzling in deep fryers and curried clam chowder up for grabs in the employee mess hall that resembles a pleasantly cheap and busy diner.

“It gives you the opportunity to be self-sufficient (and) to learn a skill,” Oliver said about the culinary arts course—one of several vocational training programs offered at Eastern and run by the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

Oliver called it a “great opportunity” and said he’s mastered each station—including bakery, sandwich and salad—in the kitchen and, most importantly, has developed a love for gastronomy.

“Hopefully, I’ll get a job in culinary arts when I get out,” he said.

That is precisely the idea behind it.

In fact, the correction department’s website (www.doccs.ny.gov) says the purpose is to help inmates “redirect their lives and become productive, law-abiding members of society.”

The state Labor Department also is involved by providing certification and apprenticeship training through Eastern’s vocational department.

Inmates earn 16 cents an hour, and, if they get a good evaluation after 90 days, can make up to 17.5 cents.

Most of the employee meals cost between \$4 and \$5, with the money going back into the program, according to Trevor Paton, the vocational supervisor at Eastern.

“It costs the state of New York and taxpayers nothing. It’s self-sufficient,” he said.

“The value is purely to assure that the inmates in this program have the skills they need when they get back on the streets to get employment and to tackle the recidivism rate in New York State,” Paton noted.

The culinary arts program got its start at Eastern in the 1960s and went by several names over the years.

It was known for a spell as Miss Piggy’s when Ethel Thomas ran the it for 18 years, Paton noted.

After that, it was dubbed the “OMH” for officers’ mess hall and later referred to as “SDR” for staff dining room.

Today, it is simply the culinary arts program and is one of the brightest spots at the historic prison that houses 980 inmates.

One of the reasons for that is Donal O’Connor, the instructor.

The Culinary Institute of America graduate said his goal is to instill a love for food in his students.

“The most rewarding thing is getting someone excited about it,” O’Connor said.

“The ones who go far are the ones who come in and immediately want to assist somebody else. They show interest right away. They start to get the love, and they develop a real affinity for food. You need that. Once you have that, you will be happy with what you do and you’ll be successful,” he said.

Hector Cruz clearly is aiming for that.

Though the 28-year-old from Harlem just started the bakery station, he already looks practiced as he produces a batch of Eastern’s acclaimed truffles under O’Connor’s watchful eye. The Harlem native carefully dips balls of ganache in a pot of melted double chocolate and places them on wax paper to harden.

“I’m learning a lot of different things,” said Cruz, who has served four years at Eastern and is set to be released in 2019.

“I like cooking. It’s something I enjoy, and I’d like to open my own restaurant when I get home,” he said.

Baron Erby is another one who has caught the foodie bug through his exposure at Eastern.

“I never did anything like this before, but I love to learn how to do food,” he said.

Erby has, so far, served six years at Eastern and has a little more than seven left, but he said once he’s released, he may very well pursue a job in the field.

For now, he slices tomatoes at the salad station with precision and fills in for another inmate who did not show up.

Meanwhile, one of the kitchen crew leaders, Richard DiGuglielmo, helps O’Connor monitor the work, which picks up as noon approaches.

Teamwork, he says, is critical to the program’s success, even on tough days.

“Being in prison is a little hard because sometimes guys wake up on the wrong side of the bed.

“You basically try to get along and learn something. We have a good bunch of guys, and when we work together, it’s a smooth day.”

DiGuglielmo, a former New York City cop, who was sentenced to 20 years to life for the October 1996 shooting death of Charles Campbell, expects to get out in 2019.

The famous con made national headlines when he claimed the shooting was justified because he was protecting his father outside the family's Dobbs Ferry delicatessen.

DiGuglielmo was even released in 2008 after a judge through out the conviction, but he would be forced to return in 2010 after the appellate court overthrew the lower court's decision.

DiGuglielmo said he is considering several options when he gets out in five years and is unsure if he will seek work in the culinary field.

"I have a catering background, but my family just sold the business last month," he said. "We'll see. Nobody knows what tomorrow will bring."

Joseph Strothers isn't necessarily looking at it that way.

His cousin, who had also served time at Eastern and completed the culinary program, is set to open a restaurant in New York City, and Strothers expects to join him when he gets out in seven years.

"I like to see other people smile when I give them something (to eat)," said the 40-year-old Harlem native. "It makes me feel good about myself like I achieved something."