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A new start for FareStart

By **KATIE ZEMTSEFF**
Journal Staff Reporter

Photos by Katie Zemtseff

The centerpiece of the dining room is a communal table made of two salvaged floor beams, which exemplifies FareStart's mission: Everything can have a second life.

Guest Chef Night returns to the local nonprofit FareStart on Thursday after a brief hiatus, but something will be very different.



Students will still prepare three-course gourmet meals under the guidance of local professional chefs. But the weekly fundraising event will be the first in FareStart's renovated building at 700 Virginia St.

FareStart, founded 15 years ago, is a training center where homeless men and women learn how to work in the food industry and get help finding jobs. The \$24.95 per-person Guest Chef Night has been a skill showcase since 1994.

In 2004, FareStart bought the 33,000-square-foot building at Seventh and Virginia to expand its teaching program. The four-story building was gutted and rebuilt, said Dan Johnson, development director for FareStart. The space used to house Jersey's All-American Sports Bar and The 700 Club, but the only things left from those days are the exterior and the exposed wooden beams throughout the dining room. Even the cigar smoke has disappeared.



The larger space means FareStart can double the number of students it trains every year.

Now the smell of food rises from two new kitchens, both about 2,000 square feet. The retail kitchen on the main floor serves lunch guests daily in the FareStart restaurant, and the contract kitchen below ground provides food to seven local homeless shelters.

Other additions include the 2,000-square-foot main dining room, a private dining room, three floors of office space, men's and women's locker rooms with bathrooms, a separate student lunchroom, two elevators and an internal loading dock.

There are private offices where students can have conversations with case managers, a luxury not available in the old space. The HVAC and utility systems were also redone.

The new space is a far cry from FareStart's old building at 1902 Second Ave., where most of the non-cooking functions took place in one room, and administrative offices were located across the street.

“As we grew we had to ad-lib the space and by the end it was this ridiculous labyrinth of office and kitchen,” said Johnson. “Walk-in freezers are a revelation to us.”

Johnson hopes the new location will be easier for people to find because it is closer to the downtown core. The streetcar is being built on Seventh Avenue in front of FareStart, which should also make it more accessible.

In searching for a building, Johnson said, the most important thing was keeping the program downtown.

“We would have been going against our mission if we went to Wallingford,” Johnson said. The homeless population is centered downtown, and moving to another locale would have made it more difficult to serve them.

The total cost ended up at \$12.5 million, \$3 million more than the original estimate. The building cost \$2.8 million to buy.

About \$8 million was raised privately, with a \$1.25 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and significant gifts from the Kresge Foundation and the FareStart board of directors.

The general contractor was Sellen Construction Co., who started construction last March. The architects were Stickney, Murphy, Romaine Architects.

Darren Medina, who works in retail design for Starbucks, donated his skills to design the restaurant dining room. The dining room has exposed piping overhead, vast lamps and huge windows. The centerpiece of the room is a communal table made of two salvaged floor beams. Johnson said the table exemplifies FareStart's mission: Everything can have a second life.

FareStart trains around 225 students a year, but plans to double that number over the next five years. Around 80 percent of FareStart graduates find jobs in the food industry.

Thanks to the new building, food donated by other agencies will not be turned away due to inadequate storage, and FareStart will be able to double its capacity to train 575 students a year.

“It feels like a brand new day,” Johnson said.

Katie Zemtseff can be reached by phone at (206) 622-8272 or by e-mail at katiez@djc.com.