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Teaching the homeless to feed the hungry: Seattle's FareStart spreads its mission nationally

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SEATTLE — When he spent his days smoking crack and helping women sell themselves, Brandon Hicks had little occasion to ponder an herbed goat-cheese tartine.

But here he was in the kitchen of FareStart, a Seattle nonprofit that specializes in turning around lives like his, carefully weighing dollops of a savory cheese mixture onto small slabs of baked dough to be served with arugula and roasted cherry tomatoes. Before long, hundreds of diners would begin arriving at the restaurant for a fixed-menu dinner overseen by a guest chef, Seth Caswell of Seattle restaurant emmer&rye.

“I didn’t know nothing about goat cheese before, but it’s pretty good, you know,” said Hicks, 23. “I’ve tried a lot of new things since I’ve been here.”

He was surrounded by people trying new things — being sober at work, showing up on time, getting a grip on their anger or shyness.

Marvin Blackweasel, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe, stood over an industrial mixer, dumping thyme, tarragon, parsley and chives into the fresh cheese — learning to cook after decades of alcoholism. He lost a landscaping job nearly three years ago, and at one point was living between a retaining wall and a cluster of trees in West Seattle.

At a metal table nearby, Andy Osterman laid a ruler beside a rectangle of chilled fennel crust and cut it in a precise grid for the entree — one square for each 4-ounce pork medallion. Osterman, 41, has struggled with a bad temper and a domestic violence conviction, and said he’s starting over after becoming a victim of the recession. He was laid off by a moving company and found himself unable to afford the room he was renting in a friend’s house.



Double-checking their work was FareStart staff chef Sam Clinton, who had once himself been homeless after blowing a promising culinary career and swanky condo on a cocaine habit.

“The students here keep me grounded,” he said. “If you want to be sober, you need to be with people who want to be sober.”

Since it was founded in the early 1990s, FareStart has helped thousands of troubled and homeless people by training them to work in the food industry. Its students have cooked millions of meals delivered to shelters, senior centers and daycares along the way. Now, with its profile raised this year by a James Beard Foundation Humanitarian Award, the program is expanding its influence by creating a network for like-minded programs across the country.



From traditional soup kitchens to programs like celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s three Fifteen restaurants, which train at-risk youngsters to be chefs, food has long been a vehicle for improving people’s lives. But FareStart and others in its new network, called Catalyst Kitchens, take it a step further, based on the powerful notion that they can accomplish three goals at once: feeding hungry people, providing housing and other support to those on the margins of society, and giving people the skills they need to lift themselves out of poverty.

Launched this year following a pilot project, Catalyst has 20 members, including Chicago’s Inspiration Corporation and Washington’s D.C. Central Kitchen. Some, such as Liberty’s Kitchen in New Orleans and Life’s Kitchen in Boise, Idaho, have created or expanded their programs based on input from Catalyst. Benefits for the member organizations can include discounted or free items from Catalyst sponsors, including job postings on Monster.com, cut-rate Starbucks products and culinary training videos from rouxbe.com. Catalyst also evaluates the organizations and gives them suggestions.



The network hopes to have 100 programs around the country by 2015, with 6,000 trainees every year cooking 10 million meals for hungry people.

“They gave us a blueprint, and we basically went from concept to operations in 13 months,” says Chris Brooks, business manager at Liberty’s Kitchen, which last year began providing meals to New Orleans schoolchildren thanks to support from Emeril Lagasse’s charitable foundation. “It saved us a world of time and resources, and it would have been impossible without the guidance of the FareStart program.”

FareStart traces its start to 1988, when a Seattle chef named David Lee decided to start making meals for the homeless in the basement of a church. He delivered them to shelters in the back of his pickup truck.

Within a few years, Lee realized he could accomplish a lot more if he was teaching the residents of the shelters to work in a professional kitchen. He reorganized his operation as a nonprofit in 1992, and that first year trained 10 students. Since then, it's become a beloved Seattle institution. Last year, FareStart trained nearly 200 people, a little over half of whom graduated, and made more than half-a-million meals for hungry people. Many students who don't graduate the first time try again later.

The students spend four months in a culinary training program, where they take classes on knife skills and life skills. They learn to read recipes, make sauces and plan menus. They meet with counselors and sit around tables discussing the patterns of behavior that got them in trouble in the first place. The students are given housing if they need it. FareStart spends \$300,000 a year renting beds in transitional apartments.

And they work, advancing from the basement kitchen, where they prepare the meals sent to shelters, to the kitchen of FareStart's elegant onsite restaurant, which is open for lunch on weekdays and which plows its proceeds back into FareStart's budget. A little more than one-third of its revenue last year — \$2.5 million — came from food sales, and more than half from private donations. Government grants made up much of the rest.

After graduating, students get three months of job-placement help and an additional six months of follow-up services to make sure they're doing well in their new jobs. About 80 percent of graduates get — and keep — jobs in the food industry, said Megan Karch, FareStart's executive director.

FareStart also has a catering business and a program for teaching young people to work as baristas.

"I see success stories, thankfully, every single week," Karch said. "Many of the individuals walking through our door tell me they feel broken: Things have fallen apart. They've lost their families. They've lost housing. They've lost everything that has ever meant something to them.

"I don't mean to imply that people can really change their lives in four months of being here. But what you do start to see is that at the end of the program, they stand up straighter. They're confident. They feel empowered. They feel like they mean something to themselves and to others."

One of the highlights of the program, Karch says, comes each Thursday night, when the students work with one of the region's top chefs to prepare a \$25 fixed-price dinner, served by volunteers. Caswell, of emmer&rye, showed up on a recent Thursday afternoon with tomatoes, arugula, pork, carrots, zucchini, broccoli, squash, potatoes and peas — nearly all the produce donated by area farms.

"I give to other charities too, but you rarely see the effect of that," Caswell said as he shook curtains of salt into a vat of boiling potatoes. "Here, I've seen the impact it has on people's lives. I'll see these guys after they graduate. I'll hire them when I see this on their resume."