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The **Ceres Community Project** provides nutritious food for families faced with illness and a learning experience for teen volunteers



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Working with the Ceres Community Project, from right, are Anna Stuffelbeam, 18, Mathilde Amiot, 18, and Ursule Amiot, 16. The three are part of a Sebastopol group that prepares healthy meals for 35 families across Sonoma County affected by cancer or other serious illness.

More than a healthy meal

By LAURA NORTON

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Creamy polenta pot pies, fresh sole Veracruz, butter-nut leek soup and honey quinoa salad all stocked west county refrigerators this week, cooked, prepared and packaged by teen chefs and eaten by families fighting illness.

In some cases, this food might be just what the doctor ordered.

The Ceres Community Project is a nonprofit organization that teaches teen volunteers cooking skills and passes their labors along to families fighting cancer and other illnesses. It has provided approximately 20,000 meals to Sonoma County residents in the past year.

"I love making good food and feeding people. It's really creative," said 16-year-old chef Rose Denicola, who spent Thursday afternoon blanching vegetables for an Asian stir fry. "And I love eating, too."

With a client list of 35 families and

24 teens chopping, sautéing and baking, the organization has grown from a good idea to a vital part of people's lives, said Cathryn Couch, program founder and executive director.

"We're cooking for people whose lives are on the line," Couch said. "We're providing the most nutritious, healing food we can, empowering and training the youth and using sustainable produce grown in Sonoma County."

Couch started the project with one volunteer and one family. They cooked one day a week to fill the family's fridge with wholesome, delicious meals that balanced the needs of the family with the specific dietary considerations that the mother, fighting breast cancer, needed.

That first week, the ill woman's husband picked up the meals.

"We had this beautiful interaction," Couch said. "There was this enormous gratitude on his part, and people feel that connection."

For teens learning to cook, seeing the importance of food, particularly nutritious food, has an impact, Couch said.

"They feel something in that beyond the food itself," Couch said, adding that after that meeting with the husband, the first teen volunteer "started to sense what she had helped to make happen."

Coordinating the meals of 35 households, and trying to do so with volunteers and minimal costs, means being flexible, Couch said.

The teens rarely use recipes, relying on whatever is donated and in the freezer. A handful of local farms donate produce, and grocery stores have extended lines of credit for items such as chicken and fish.

Teens cook three days a week, aiming to create four complete entrees, a soup, a salad, a dessert and a number of medicinal foods.

Teens learn by doing, Couch said, whether their contributions are as simple as washing dishes or as in-

involved as whipping up a creamy polenta crust for a pot pie.

"When you're doing that kind of quantity, there is always a job for everyone," she said.

The growing organization recently earned nonprofit status and moved into a kitchen in the former Patty James Cooking School in Sebastopol.

Couch works part time as executive director. A part-time nutritionist, volunteer coordinator and client coordinator also have been hired.

The resources — and need — are nearly unlimited, Couch said.

"We could cook for 120 families a week," Couch said. "We know there's enough food, and we know there's enough volunteers."

Families experiencing illness and teen and adult volunteers can visit the Ceres Community Project Web site at www.ceresproject.org.

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