Cooking that cares

Ceres Community Project pairs youth with elderly with organic culinary training

By Betti Lambro

The Ceres Community Project is a non-profit that connects Sonoma County youth with the opportunity to cook free, wholesome, organic meals for county residents coping with serious illnesses, especially cancer.

Ceres was started by professional chef Cathryn Couch of Forestville. At its core Ceres is about empowering young people. Couch began her activism as a teenager and, through Ceres, hopes to show today’s teens that they have the power to make a difference in the world.

The youth that volunteer their time in the kitchen with Couch not only benefit from helping others, they also help themselves by learning to cook, forging active relationships with real foods and by building community and connection in a largely disconnected world.

Since the end of March, Couch and her budding chefs have prepared over 4,000 meals. They gather at the kitchen after school on Thursdays for a whirlwind of cooking for up to 13 families at a time.

"Literally we’re trying to do seven different dishes at once," says Couch. "All of the containers have to be sterilized, everything has to be packaged, it all has to get in the right bag, the kitchen has to get cleaned up, all of that in four hours while we cook 200 meals, it’s really a lot. And I try to talk about the clients, to bring them present in terms of what they’re dealing with.”

The amount of food each client receives depends on their situation, but on average it amounts to about four days of food per week. The meals comprise three full entrees for every member of the client’s family, two large containers of soup, a main course salad and a dessert. Some very low-income clients have most of their food needs met by Ceres.

And the food is fancy. The Thanksgiving menu boasted turkey shepherd’s pie, spiced cranberry relish, salmon wild rice pilaf, green beans almondine, stuffed portobello mushrooms on bed of kale, cream of butternut soup, turkey soup and vegan pumpkin pie with an almond crust.

Couch also prepares two medicinal foods, energy truffles and immune broth, specifically for people undergoing chemotherapy or radiation treatments.

Couch’s skill set is uniquely adapted to the needs of this project. She earned an MBA at the University of Michigan and then helped start a number of women’s businesses in Ann Arbor. She moved to California in 1980 and ran the communications department for The Hunger Project for four years while it was based in San Francisco. She has lived in Sonoma County since 1991, and in 1992 she started Sundance Pantry, a home delivery meal service that for 10 years prepared organic meals for busy but food-conscious people. Currently she earns her livelihood in the kitchen of a west Sebastopol retreat center.

The Ceres Community Project emerged in 2006 when a friend asked Couch to mentor her daughter and teach the teenager culinary skills. Soon the idea of cooking for individuals dealing with cancer crystallized and they identified two families to work with.

“We cooked for them for seven weeks and in my view that was gonna be the end of it,” Couch chuckled. “But literally about three weeks into our cooking together I woke up one morning with a vision of the whole thing.”

Her long-term vision is expansive. Couch wants Ceres to acquire use of land where a large kitchen can be the focal point of a healing center where food is grown, survivors of serious illness come for cooking classes, youth come in the afternoons to harvest food and cook it for clients. On weekends the space would be a retreat center where people undergoing treatment can come for support, bodywork and healing foods.

“I knew right away that I didn’t want it to be my project, I wanted it to be held in a larger circle of people,” Couch said. “It will happen because it’s being held already in a lot of people’s hearts. There is somebody who has the property, we just have to find them.

Couch has been gradually but successfully networking outwards to build the project ever since. By the end of September 2006, Couch had collected a grant of $1,000 from the Sebastopol chapter of Bread for the Journey (a nation-wide organization that promotes community building with small grants), $5,000 from Andy’s Market in Sebastopol, a group of high school students from Summerfield Waldorf School in Santa Rosa to cook with, and use of the kitchen at The Community Church of Sebastopol.

By March of this year, Ceres had acquired nonprofit status through the sponsorship of Relationship Centered Community Care of Sebastopol and then quickly received a $7,500 grant from “To Celebrate Life” Breast Cancer Foundation of Marin.

In October Ceres was given $15,000 from two private donors. This money will allow Couch to expand the project next year. She hopes to find more young people to cook on Wednesday afternoons and cancer survivors to cook on Thursday mornings. With the kitchen bustling from noon on Wednesday until Thursday evening, Couch thinks Ceres can handle 35 to 40 families each week. She still needs to round up operating funds for the second half of 2008, but for now she trusts funds will materialize by June.

The group of volunteer food delivery drivers will need to grow and Couch also hopes to find professional chefs to volunteer with the students so she can give herself a break from time to time. She would love to find volunteers who would prepare individual items such as the immune broth or energy truffles.

For 2008 Ceres needs $55,000 in fresh, unprocessed local food donations and Couch is currently in the process of forming relationships with organic farmers in the county.

“My intention is to be able to walk into the kitchen and know where everything is grown, to empower our clients to know who is growing their food, for the kids to know who is growing that food, and for those farmers to also know that they’re growing it specifically for this project,” she said.

The project is named for the goddess Ceres because she is symbolic of agriculture, the earth and collaboration. “She also has some relationship to the process of grieving. We’ve had two of our clients pass away this year,” Couch said, noting how appropriate Ceres is for representing the realities of the project.