CERES COMMUNITY PROJECT: Volunteers discover the healing powers of good food, helping others

Cooking nourishes teens

By RAYNE WOLFE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Ceres Community Project, founded by chef Cathryn Couch, brings teen volunteers together twice a week to prepare meals for families dealing with health challenges.

Couch is an herbalist, evolutionary astrologer and former director of communications for The Hunger Project in San Francisco. She also has a University of Michigan MBA, is passionate about food and has brought that expertise to Sonoma County to offer help to those who are ill.

She said there is a relationship between illness and diet. “When people eat our food and feel better, it motivates us to do more,” said Couch, who oversees a group of adult and teen volunteers with the Sonoma County nonprofit.

Named after a Roman goddess of agriculture, the Ceres Community Project prepares weekly meals for 17 families. That means volunteers produce more than 300 meals in just two afternoon sessions each week.

Operating out of the loaned kitchen of the Community Church of Sebastopol, the sound of washing, chopping and cooking fill the space. The group uses organic produce donated from several sources, including Andy’s Market and Whole Foods.

A $5,000 grant from Andy’s Market and a $1,000 grant from Bread for the Journey helped launch the program, which also refers private chefs to families who choose to pay for meal preparation.

“Right now, food is our only expense, so we are working to increase our sources. I’m hoping that a number of organic farmers come on line with us, said Couch.

The founding team included Couch, Cherie Lippard and her daughter Alysha and Judy Pereira, who coordinates the volunteers.

“Not only do we support people who are ill and need help, it’s wonderful to see the teen volunteers. So many knew nothing about cooking, about what food does for your body. Just seeing the thank-you notes is important for the teens,” said Couch.

One student who yearns for a culinary career is Bryce MacMath, a 17-year-old senior at Summerfield Waldorf. Inspired by the healing powers of his grandmother’s chicken and dumplings, he is focusing on healthy cooking practices.

“I’ve learned so much about which foods are healthy or unhealthy. I’ve stopped eating unhealthy foods, fast foods,” he said.

He is among the volunteers who help deliver food. For Katrina Doughty, a 17-year-old senior at El Molino High School, the program has given her a gift of selflessness.

“I want to be a nurse, so I like to help and I’m fascinated by the cycles of how the food moves, how hard to hand it moves along and helps others,” she said.

She usually volunteers with her mom, and she views the service as a mother-daughter bonding experience.

“My mother suggested it, and from the very first day I knew it was right for us. I feel there is so much negative news about teens. We’re not all using drugs. The people we serve? They are so often in my thoughts,” she said.

While the program is gaining clients, volunteers and recognition by cancer groups who may refer clients for eight-week service cycles, the challenge looms of finding a permanent home.

“What we really need is our own commercial kitchen where we can set things up and leave it. And if there was a little land on which we could grow healing herbs and other things, that would be ideal,” said Couch.

To learn more about the Ceres Community Project go to www.kitchencosmology.com or e-mail cathy@kitchencosmology.com.

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