

CREATING A PLACE FOR TEENS TO NAVIGATE THROUGH LIFE USING FOOD AS THE MEDIUM



By, Michelle Callahan for Future Chefs

Toni Elka, executive director and founder of Future Chefs in 2008, is the granddaughter of a union organizer and farmer. She holds a BFA in painting from MassArt and a management certificate from Boston University. Her passion is connecting young hands-on learners, who are at risk of being left behind, with authentic work that builds mastery and craftsmanship.

The packaging of 8,000 biscotti for Winston Flowers has come to end, as another large scale culinary project is wrapped up. They were created by young cooks from Future Chefs, a non-profit organization in Boston teaching teens teamwork, responsibility to each other and meeting deadlines, all a part of the learning process as the students worked tirelessly to complete the job on time.

Future Chefs aims not only to develop culinary expertise, but also those important life lessons necessary to succeed in your first job and beyond. The organization was founded by Toni Elka, executive director of Future Chefs. Inspired by a need to help young people have a plan for their future, Toni created a place for teenagers to learn the tools to navigate through life, using food as the medium.

Simply put, kids need jobs. Toni's approach: design a program that fills the need for talented young chefs in the Boston restaurant industry by creating a pipeline of motivated apprentices. A classic networker, Toni began by brokering her relationships to develop her idea. Future Chefs was born and has been growing since its inception in 2008.

Serving youth in the greater Boston area, students begin by joining an out of school program at Future Chefs. Once they decide that culinary is in their future, they move to the apprenticeship program and a chance to work with chefs like Nicki Hobson, Island Creek Oyster Bar, Kevin O'Donnell of Salty Pig and SRV, Cory Seeker, Trade and Deborah Hansen, Taberna de Haro. The apprenticeship program provides them with an opportunity to further explore a first career in culinary and access to jobs at high-end Boston restaurants with leading chefs.

“Coaching and ongoing mentoring is essential to our program,” Toni explains. “We’re not a cooking school. We’re creating an environment where kids feel supported and build the confidence needed to move forward in life. It’s not unusual for me to receive phone calls from alumni seeking job advice. That’s when I know the program is working,” says Toni, “When I can help them reach that next step.”

And that mentoring mindset is exactly how seasoned chef Tom Berry helped Juan Pedrosa advance through the Boston cooking scene to become the opening chef for Yvonne’s, a modern reinterpretation of the supper club, located in the iconic Locke-Ober space. Tom explained that Juan immediately impressed him as a young person who had what it took to make it as a chef. He brought him along to Nantucket to work in both The Great Harbor Yacht Club and The Proprietors Bar and Table, and then Juan moved onto Trade.

“Working with Juan over the years has been rewarding – I was able to teach him about food, business, and lessons he needed to learn as he grew up,” Tom says.

Tom also sees the value in the Future Chefs program, now more than ever, when Boston restaurants are desperately in need of skilled workers. “The key is getting kids excited early about cooking,” Tom explains. “It also allows young people the chance to decide if a career in cooking is right for them before they spend a lot of money on cooking school, and find that it’s not the right job,” he continued.

Some ways restaurants can get involved with Future Chefs include by becoming a partner in their apprenticeship program and by doing chef demos. But what’s intriguing about the Future Chefs model is its tangible economic outcome. Up-and-coming chefs get a chance to work with a mentor, while Boston eateries are training future employees.

“It’s in everyone’s interest to help a young person succeed,” says Toni.

For more information about Future Chefs, please contact Carolyn Grimes at Carolyn@futurechefs.net or explore Futurechefs.net.