

## COOKING

## Students hope culinary skills are the recipe for a career

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Irene Lewis lost nearly everything, including a child, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

After leaving a shelter there, she and two of her teenage children moved to California to start a new life among relatives who lived in Vacaville and Vallejo. The trio eventually made its way to Napa, where they were able to get assistance from Napa Community Housing.

Now, Lewis is hoping for a fresh start to her

professional life.

She is one of about eight aspiring chefs who are among the first students of Community Action Napa Valley's new pastry class, a spin-off of the successful culinary class that launched in 2009. Over the course of two months, students learn basic pastry and baking skills that could help them land a job in Napa's hospitality industry.

"It's really designed to get (students) up to speed on commercial baking terminology, methods used in commercial baking and understanding the concepts of baking, which is totally different from cooking," said Michael Paik, the chef who teaches the course and helped start the original culinary class.

CANV interviews prospective students, all of whom are clients of the nonprofit and are either homeless or low-income, CANV Executive Director Drene Johnson said. Students who show a strong interest, commitment and promise of success are accepted into the class, which is offered to them at no charge.

The students are all graduates of CANV's culinary training program, which teaches basic cooking, food preparation, sanitation and restaurant skills. During the pastry class, students learn to make things like quick breads and artisan breads.

Pastry classes are held in the kitchen of the Salvation Army in downtown Napa, which lends use of its pantry and equipment. In exchange, baked goods are given to the nonprofit. Extras are taken by students and given to the South Napa Shelter.

"The Salvation Army has been good enough to let us use everything they have," Paik said, adding that CANV would not only welcome monetary gifts, but donations of cooking and baking equipment as well.

The students and Paik are also working to create their own sourdough bread starter that CANV

can sell to help support the program in the future.

“My real focus here is to go retail, to find a signature item we can sell to keep the school going,” Johnson said. “I’m so worried we aren’t going to have (grant) money available so I want them to become self-sufficient.”

Johnson said students are working with Paik to develop a pastry that can be sold in Napa, possibly at the Chefs Market.

“We’re looking for some niche items we can produce that aren’t too involved, that the health department is happy with and that’s cost-effective so the program can sustain itself,” Paik said.

The two classes cost about \$70,000 to operate each year, or \$1,800 to \$2,000 per student, and are supported through grant funding at this time, Johnson said. In the pastry class, students who graduate receive a chef’s jacket, a set of pastry knives and certificate of completion.

“Knife skills are really important but most of all we teach them life skills,” Johnson said. “Be on time, be respectful, be clean, don’t argue. This is very hard for some of our folks. They’ve never had this.”

Tameeka Evans, the wholesale manager at Model Bakery, was a member of the second graduating class of the culinary program in 2009. Two weeks into the class, she was hired at Model Bakery as a member of the counter staff and has spent the past four years working her way up to her current position.

She credited CANV’s class, in part, for her success.

“At the time, I had gone through a rough divorce and was homeless,” she said. “My case manager suggested I would be a good candidate for the culinary class. It was the best thing I could have ever done.”

Evans had some experience in the hospitality industry but no hands-on bakery history. She said the culinary class not only taught her work skills and gave her something to add to her resume, but helped her on a personal level.

“It gave me a sense of independence and helped me build my confidence, especially in learning a whole new trade,” Evans said. “It was very beneficial in helping me rebuild my life and I will forever be grateful to them.”

Errick Woods, a 29-year-old student of the pastry class, said he hopes to find success similar to Evans, or other graduates who Paik said have gone on to work at Oenotri, Brix, Yo’Belle, Biscuits and other Napa establishments.

In August, Woods was released from jail and said he is trying to get his life on track and find a place, other than the street, to live. He recently completed the culinary class and, though he intends to work in a large kitchen, enrolled in the pastry class to expand his knowledge.

“If there’s two people applying for a job and I have a little more experience, it’s one up for me,” said Woods, a self-described “foodie” who has images of french fries, a shake, a corn dog and other food items tattooed on his arms.

Irene Lewis, 42, said she too is hoping the class will give her new opportunities. She is

unemployed and working to get her GED. She plans to go to college to be a counselor and work in a kitchen to support herself during that time.

“This is opening a door that will help me later on in life,” Lewis said. “If I want to go work in a bakery, I have the credentials to do that. If I want to work in a restaurant, I have the experience and certificate saying I can.”