

Ingredients For Success

Massachusetts Inmates Learn Cooking,
Life Skills

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This was clearly a well-managed eatery, prepared in scrupulous detail for the fine-dining lunch rush. Pressed white linens covered a dozen or so tables, each adorned with subtle, floral centerpieces. Savory, herbal aromas wafted from the kitchen area. A table of fresh baked desserts waited with tantalizing patience in the corner. The guests shared many things, but nothing more palpable than the anticipation that masqueraded as polite chatter.

A buzzer blared, a metal door clanged open and the chefs de cuisine entered the dining room for a final inspection, escorted by uniformed guards. The array of starch white toques bobbed unevenly against the harsh, concrete block walls now coming into focus.

This was decidedly not a fine eatery; at least not in the traditional sense.

"We prepare high quality food in a modern, pristine kitchen environment. Except our knives are chained to the cutting boards," said William Bourgeois, a graduate of the prestigious Culinary Institute of America and Director of the Middlesex Sheriff's Office Inmate Culinary Arts Program.

In July of 2006 the Middlesex Sheriff's Office opened a new, modernized wing at the House of Correction in Billerica, Massachusetts. Included in this facility was a properly equipped classroom and separate kitchen to be utilized by a vocational/educational program centered on food services.

The Inmate Culinary Arts Program was conceived and instituted by Sheriff James V. DiPaola with the explicit goal of preparing inmates for life after incarceration.

After 400 hours of classroom and in-kitchen training during the twelve-week course, the inmate participants are tested not only on their cooking skills but math and technical knowledge as well. The reward for the sometimes grueling syllabus is a five-year ServSafe sanitation certificate (a necessary item for working in the food service industry) and a Certificate of Participation from Shawsheen Valley Technical High School, an academic partner that provides instructors and curriculum material. Inmates also receive twelve college credits toward a degree at Middlesex Community College, should they decide to continue their culinary education upon release.

"We not only are able to teach people to cook and to earn a living but also, while we have that inmate's attention, we are able to teach them some life skills as well," said Sheriff DiPaola. "It is important for them to use their skills in the workplace upon release but it is more important that they learn to look at their lives the same way they would look at a recipe. You have to put in the right ingredients for success."

The Middlesex House of Correction houses approximately 900 male inmates on any given day, all of whom are serving sentences of no more than two and a half years.

"Most of the men in our custody are not bad men. They made bad decisions," said Sheriff DiPaola. "They will all return to society. We have an opportunity – a literal captive audience – to send these men back to their neighborhoods with the tools needed to stop the cycle of criminal behavior."

In the Kitchen

In the summer of 2010, four years after the inaugural class, the Inmate Culinary Arts Program completed its twelfth cycle, having graduated 165 inmates since its inception.

For those inmate graduates, getting into the kitchen was no piece of cake.

Inmates interested in the Culinary Arts Program must first submit an application to the Director of Education. Once received, the inmate's incarceration history is reviewed, with focus on disciplinary issues and completed rehabilitation programs. Any previously assigned rehabilitation programs must be finished before an inmate can move on to the culinary program. Staff members check the education history to ensure the inmate has attained or is close to attaining a high school diploma or General Education Degree (GED). Without it, they would not be able to take advantage of the college credits. This background review is combined with recommendations from treatment specialists, caseworkers, officers and culinary staff. Once preliminary information is gathered, the inmate is interviewed to determine if his attitude and intentions match the program's mission.

"The education program at the Middlesex Sheriff's Office is an effective rehabilitative program enabling adult students to



reassess their values, goals, and priorities in life in a positive way,” said Steve Ultrino, Director of Education. “We see inmates resolve to break the cycle of criminality, all while acquiring the personal, social, and technical skills necessary for a successful and permanent reentry into society.”

Upon acceptance, inmates are expected to engage in the rigorous learning environment and embrace the opportunity. Instructors butterfly the meat of the course into two portions: in-class and in-kitchen.

Mathematics take up the majority of class time, with lessons on fractions, customary units of measurement, conversions and yield percents. Instructors also spend time on practical, math-related industry necessities, such as calculating food and beverage costs.

Before handling food, inmates learn proper sanitation and safety procedures and must pass written safety assessments with 100 percent accuracy. Once in the kitchen, inmates are expected to identify and demonstrate various techniques and methods, from knife skills to recipe interpretation. They prepare dressings, soups, stocks, sauces and learn basic baking techniques.

At the end of the twelve-week program, Shawsheen Valley Technical High School administers a comprehensive final exam. The Culinary Arts Program has a 100 percent pass rate.

Some, such as inmate Jarrod Harris, had previous experience in the kitchen. He enjoyed cooking with family members prior to incarceration and once in the program, excelled right away at fruit displays and baking.

In contrast, the culinary world was a mystery to inmate Brian Harris (no relation to Jarrod).

Brian spent time as a kitchen worker at the outset of his sentence. After nine months he realized he wanted to explore the culinary program further, applied and was accepted.

“I would take care of the fridge or the freezer or make the soup. Sometimes I would clean or cook the meal. I like it all. I liked everything,” Brian said. “I never thought I had any cooking skills or anything. I am not amazing but the Deputy taught us a lot. He really did teach us a lot.”

The Deputy is Deputy William Bourgeois, director of the program and its primary instructor. In his kitchen, the food is the easy part.

“I always tell them it’s who you are when you wake up in the morning,” said Deputy Bourgeois. “When you come down you need to be well-groomed, clean-shaven, have your fingernails trimmed. It’s a little bit of discipline. What we do here is more than just the cooking aspect.”

These non-syllabus lessons – discipline, responsibility, teamwork, leadership – are just as essential for success in a restaurant as they are for success on the streets.

This philosophy combining practical, vocational skills with a positive value system emerged from Sheriff DiPaola’s holistic approach to corrections.

“The lock-em-up and throw away the key mentality has gone the way of spurs and six-shooters,” said Sheriff DiPaola. “The modern sheriff has progressive techniques and technology at his fingertips, used to address the underpinning issues of criminal behavior. Education, family, job, mental health, finances – these are just some of the everyday issues we take for granted. But for an inmate, making adjustments in one or more of these can change which side of the bars they are on.”

Each inmate that enters the House of Correction undergoes an exhaustive assessment that determines what type of housing, programming and education classes would best suit the individual. Releasing an inmate to the streets with a job or the skills to immediately get hired is a signifi-



cant factor in preventing repeat offending. Culinary training was chosen as the hallmark because the food service industry is among the fastest growing industries in America.

The course reintroduces inmates to a hard day's work, confidence and pride in what they do and places emphasis on another important factor in recidivism prevention: family.

The admittance of inmates' family members into the facility is a rarity except during Inmate Culinary Arts Program graduations. Inmates are recognized in front of loved ones for their hard work, something many have never experienced before. They are also charged with planning a menu, preparing and serving a luncheon for the invited guests. Providing for family induces a pride and sense of responsibility that will hopefully carry over post-incarceration.

"Now I feel more positive or more secure because I have training," said inmate Jarrod Harris. "This is the first time I have ever taken anything as far as training. I have done painting and labor stuff but I never done anything as far as going to school. This is the first time I have ever stepped up to the plate and actually did something."

Success

"I'm glad for the job where I'm at now, the opportunities they've given me," said former inmate and culinary graduate Thomas Holmes. "I went from making \$8 an hour as a dishwasher to making \$18, in probably 60 days."

Holmes was first incarcerated in 1994 and has been incarcerated three times since. The most recent commitment came in March 2009 on a drug-related offense, leading to a two-and-a-half-year sentence. While incarcerated, Holmes took

advantage of the programming model at the Middlesex House of Correction, receiving his GED, graduating from an intense substance abuse treatment program and in March 2010, one year after his most recent commitment, graduating from the Inmate Culinary Arts Program. With each small success, Holmes quickly moved closer to re-entry, spending a month in the work release housing and securing a dishwashing job at a local chain restaurant. He ultimately landed in a 12-step rehabilitation program, living off the grounds of the House of Correction where he is free to work, come and go – with the addition of a GPS tracking bracelet secured to him at all times, for the remainder of his sentence.

Not satisfied with washing dishes, Holmes utilized skills and connections gained through the Culinary Program to seek better opportunities. His perseverance was rewarded when Holmes was offered a job cooking at a local upscale restaurant.

Just four months after his graduation from the Culinary Arts Program, former inmate Thomas Holmes was promoted to kitchen manager.

"The inmate programs we have created revolve around taking control and taking responsibility for your own life," said Sheriff DiPaola. "Whether they continue in the hospitality field upon release or not, the culinary program teaches these men a strong work ethic and to take pride in what they do. Our graduates turned their incarceration into an opportunity and, hopefully, a life changing experience."

Interested in finding hard facts to back up the anecdotal evidence, Sheriff DiPaola commissioned Dr. Natasha Frost from the Center for Criminal Justice Policy Research at Northeastern University in Boston to conduct a study of recidivism among inmates released from the Middlesex House of Correction at Billerica.

The study – completed on May 18, 2009 one year after its inception – was the first county-commissioned recidivism study in Massachusetts and only the fourth commissioned recidivism study ever done in the entire Commonwealth. Also, among those four studies, this was the first university to complete a recidivism study (the other three studies were done by the Urban Institute and the Crime and Justice Foundation).

Dr. Frost and her team looked at inmates released from the House of Correction in Billerica annually between 1994 and 2007. They conducted a comprehensive study to establish recidivism rates for samples of inmates released from Billerica in 1994, 2004 and 2007 (the full study can be found online at www.middlesexsheriff.com).

The study found evidence to support a significant decline in recidivism, as well as the benefit of inmate programming.

For example, the study found that in the decade between 1994 and 2004, recidivism within 3 years of release dropped by 10 percentage points. In regards to programming, 34 percent of inmates released in 2007 had completed programming while incarcerated – as compared to only 29 percent in 2004. In 1994 there was little to no programming.

The renovation and modernization project done in 2006 at the House of Correction – the same project that gave birth to the Culinary Arts Program – made it more efficient and easy



for inmates to obtain programming. It also increased the likelihood that participating inmates would finish.

Per the study, the drop in recidivism rates has a direct correlation to treatment participation within the House of Correction. The study speaks to the benefits of inmate programming, such as the Culinary Arts Program, and solidifies the success of the institutional and philosophical changes at the Middlesex Sheriff's Office.

One such success is Joseph Cobb. He was first incarcerated in 1994 and has been incarcerated four times since. His most recent incarceration was on August 28, 2008 when he was sentenced to two years for a drug offense. He became estranged from his son and ex-wife due to his substance abuse. But like Thomas Holmes, Cobb saw an opportunity in the programming model at the House of Correction and graduated from the Culinary Arts Program in October, 2009. Cobb's goal – which he achieved one month later – was to leave incarceration and enter a drug-free environment, live a crime-free lifestyle and secure a job cooking at a restaurant.

"There are different avenues available. I used them," Cobb said in 2010 when he returned to the House of Correction

to speak to the most recent graduates of the Culinary Arts Program. "There were so many little things I needed."

Cobb also understood the need to continue his education if he wanted to surpass expectations in the restaurant business. With the assistance of an education counselor from the Middlesex Sheriff's Office, Cobb became the first Culinary Arts Program graduate to take advantage of the twelve college credits offered with successful completion the program. Cobb completed his first semester at Middlesex Community College in May, 2010 and immediately enrolled in future classes. He has since moved into his own apartment, secured occupation as a cook at a restaurant and begun to put his addiction behind him through continued rehabilitation programs. Cobb has reentered his son's life, even watching with pride as his son graduated from high school this past spring. Both son and father will be going to college in the fall.

"I just don't want to live that type of lifestyle anymore," said Cobb. "My life is back on track right now and I refuse to turn around." ❄