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Cooking program at Northampton jail seeks to connect participants with jobs, not more trouble, upon release

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NORTHAMPTON — The inmates are having steak for dinner.

But this meal is no day-to-day, overly processed jailhouse “steak.” On a July evening inside the walls of the Hampshire jail, the kitchen is buzzing with activity. There’s the seasoning of the prime rib, the chop-chop-chopping of the carrots, the boiling of the jambalaya broth.

For about four months, a group of seven men have been taking courses in culinary arts, learning the ins and outs of food preparation and finessing their kitchen skills.

On this night, the eve of the graduation ceremony where they receive their certifications, the inmates are bracing for the arrival of their families who they will be serving.

In the kitchen, Eugenio Negron, 38, is manning one of the chopping stations. He thinks about his wife. He thinks about his seven children. He thinks about all those years spent running around with a gang. He thinks about the nine stab wounds he acquired when he opted to leave the gang.

“A lot of people are depending on me to change,” he said. “That’s what matters: family. Sometimes we slip up. This is my last call. My last shot.”

For some of the inmates, their release dates are within sight but not necessarily on the horizon. They range from two months to seven years.

In a criminal justice system that doesn’t always afford second chances, these inmates-turned-novice-cooks are striving to return to the outside world with practical skills that enable them to turn a corner — and stay out for good.

“It’s time for a new beginning,” Negron said. “Most of us are mad scared we’re gonna get out and have nothing.”

Serving up second chances: inmates learn to cook in jail



'Tough, but nurturing'

The fact that this program is a last chance for some of these inmates is not lost on Nelson Lacey, one of the group's instructors.

"I think it's very important to them," Lacey said. "A lot of guys like to push back parole and release dates, which to me shows they're very committed when they get in here ... they also understand that what they're learning in there is valuable to them when they get out. Not just the life skills, but the certification aspect as well."

Inmates spend at least three months in the classroom working toward ServSafe certifications — the industry safety training certificate administered by the National Restaurant Association.

Lacey, who also chairs the culinary arts department at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, developed the program five years ago. As an instructor, Lacey said he aims to strike a balance somewhere between friendly and coach-like. He's tough, but nurturing. He's kind, but strict. Lacey pushes the inmates and challenges them to complete their tasks at hand and do them well.

"I think that the relationship piece is one of the more important pieces while you're there," he said. "Because you're not just there as an educator, you're also there as a model ... you're showing them there are other things they can do with their lives, things that aren't going to end them back in this facility they've been in for so long."

The crimes they're doing time for isn't even a driving factor — most of them being drug or larceny-related convictions — so long as they are in good standing with the jail and complete the application process through their case workers.

Lacey then evaluates the list of candidates interested in the program and decides whether they're a good fit.

"In a lot of ways, I think these types of things kind of help these inmates maintain control over themselves and their actions because there is something to work toward," Lacey said.

The program means something different to each of the students. There's Jeff Cinelli, a father who uses the class to connect with his teenage daughter, as she's in a cooking class of her own. There's Negron, the ex-gang member who longs to open his own restaurant.

There's Nelson Aponte, a charismatic, quick-talker who wants to return to the tourist-saturated restaurant scene of Tampa Bay. And there's Shawn Heckley, a 21-year-old college student who wants to make a name for himself in the hospitality industry and travel the world working on cruise ships.

"The gentlemen were really, really excited. They're proud of what they're doing," Lacey said. "That's something that can't be given. That's something that's earned. You gotta start somewhere in life, earning something. For a lot of these guys, it's their second or third chance."

Having a sense of what your goals are and how you want to apply these skills once you're out is important, Lacey said. But inmates should also, in more ways than one, be prepared for an uphill battle.

For starters, he continued, inmates with longer sentences are oftentimes years behind others in the industry who have the same ambitions. In jail, the inmates have structure and order. But outside these walls, there's the risk of being inundated with distractions.

Their way of life, Lacey said, "is going to change dramatically from the inside to the outside."

'You learn by mistakes'

It was April, and the classroom portion of the room was just getting underway. Arriving from their dinner with other inmates, 11 men crowded around a table in a recreation room as instructor Francesco Dell'Olio, or "Franco" as he's called, prepared for class. Over the span of the course, the number of students shrunk from 14 to seven. Some had acted up, some were released from jail, others just quit.

Franco asks the men what they had for dinner.

"It was supposed to be chicken soup," one of the inmates said, remarking on the cafeteria food.

"Supposed to be?" Franco said.

"Yeah," the man said. "It was watered down."

That day, the inmates were handed back graded quizzes and would spend time in class prepping for yet another. Remember, Franco told them, "you learn by mistakes."

Shawn Heckley looks up from his quiz, claps his hands and does his best Gene Simmons impression, his tongue sticking straight out before belting out a resounding “woo!”

He holds up his quiz: 100 percent.

However, that class would be one of Heckley's last. A few weeks later, he was released and not able to finish the program.

On May 2, Heckley's release date, the 21-year-old Easthampton man stepped outside the barbed wire perimeter that had surrounded him for four months. No more missing meals if you woke up too late. No more guards, as he put it, jesting about the “dog food” inmates ate for each meal.

That afternoon, Heckley's father picked him up in front of the jail. His first meal on the outside, he said, was a no-brainer — Olive Garden.

Even months after that first meal, he still talks about the pasta Alfredo with chicken and shrimp as if it was a religious experience.

“I'll never forget that first bite of food,” he said. “It wasn't warm — it was hot. There was flavor. You could taste the dough in the pasta, the cream in the sauce.”

“In jail,” he continued, “you're so used to this bland taste, but just different consistencies.”

Even though Heckley had just under two months of coursework under his belt when he left jail, the experience changed him, he said. He can't go to any dining establishment or coffee shop without thinking of his class.

He eyes his servers like a hawk — noting which items they handle with their bare hands, the surfaces his food touches, the cleanliness of work stations.

“I definitely take my level of food standards more seriously ... It's a whole new way of thinking,” Heckley said. “You notice all the red flags.”

He noted the chef at a hibachi restaurant who used the same knife for the raw meats and assorted veggies without cleaning it, and a worker at a coffee shop who used her bare hands to scoop ice into his drink.

“Being in for only a short time,” Heckley said, “it was a major shock reintegrating.”

After he was released, Heckley recalled sitting on his bed when he started to feel hungry. He looked down at his phone and panicked. It was past 8 p.m. He had missed dinner in the cafeteria, he thought.

Then he remembered where he was.

Preperation

Before the inmates' families arrived for their July 21 graduation ceremony, the men worked for about four hours the night before and all through the following afternoon making preparations and putting finishing touches on their dishes like stuffed chicken, jambalaya, pork tenderloin, bread pudding and blueberry cobbler.

Just before the families packed into the gathering room for the meal they were promised would be restaurant-quality, the inmates were scrambling from one end of the kitchen to the other — their standard issue jail attire swapped out for gray pants, white aprons and a black chef's hat.

The heat of the kitchen brings 39-year-old Aponte, of Springfield, back to his days living in Tampa. Aponte presents himself in the kitchen much like he presents himself elsewhere in the jail — like a mayor.

There's no mistaking when Aponte is in the room. He's loud and boisterous and has friendly interactions with just about anyone he comes into contact with. But when you've been in and out of the system, touring jail to jail, for as long as Aponte has, you know people, he said.

"I'm a people person," Aponte said.

Aponte, who has roughly three years left on his sentence, said he is bound to return to Tampa where he plans to break into the service industry and work in a restaurant.

"I'm ready to roll," he said. "Ready to give myself a chance."

Aponte said he grew up with a number of the men in the culinary program, some of whom even sold drugs in the same part of Springfield.

"Everyone living your lifestyle growing up from the same area, you're with 'em. When you live that way, you're bound to meet everyone who lives that way," he said. "In jail."

Lacey approaches Aponte's prep station.

"I'm on the same page as you," Aponte assures the chef. "That's good," Lacey replies. "I'm rubbin' off."

Meanwhile, Jeff Cinelli was chopping long carrots that would eventually be baked and glazed for a subtle, but rich, side dish.

"We're inmates," Cinelli said.

Chop

"You get in here, you start doing this stuff, and you forget where you are. You're creating something."

Chop

"Since you can't be out mowin' the lawn," Cinelli said, "this is the next best thing."

Graduation day

Just before the graduation ceremony, as dinner is getting underway, the inmates stand at attention behind the serving table.

Cinelli, who's dishing out beverages to folks at the end of the assembly line, eyes his wife and two kids.

"I gotta say, I'm feeling pretty great about tonight," he said. "My wife is here, my son and my daughter are here, and I think it's going to be a pretty good evening. I'm excited."

The first speaker of the evening steps up to the lectern and looks out at the sea of families and inmates as they visit and embrace and eat. So much had been building up to this day. He didn't want to rush them.

Take your time, Kip Fonsh, director of education at the jail, told the crowd. "Food tends to bring us together in very, very important ways, so we don't want to take away from that."

Other inmates, who did not participate in the culinary program, were also recognized at the graduation ceremony — some for earning their GEDs, others for completing various skills classes and certifications. As the graduates, one after the other, were called to the front of the room to claim their certificates and awards, Aponte sat — one arm around his mother, the other around his grandmother — waiting for his name to be called.

And when it was, the room exploded in a thunderous applause. Aponte claimed his certificate, shook the chefs' hands and turned around to speak.

"I just want to say one thing. I want to thank my grandma and my mother for showing up," he said, putting his hand over his heart. "They've been with me the whole time. Thank you, I love you."

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