

Soups And Sweets - A Perfect Recipe For Giving Back To A Community - Ep1

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- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:13 [music] From Kessler Foundation, this is Disabilities at Work. A new series about the impact of our employment grant program on the lives of job seekers with disabilities. Follow us as we explore workplace successes and the people and programs that make those happen. I'm Joan Banks-Smith, Editor and Producer of the series. And in this episode, Jessica Ganga, our Communications and Digital Media Coordinator, met up with Cyndi Kleinbart, Chef and Program Manager of the Soups and Sweets Culinary Training Program at the Samost Jewish Family and Children's Service of Southern New Jersey. Let's listen in.
- JESSICA GANGA: 00:52 Welcome, Cyndi. We're so happy to have you, and I'm looking forward to hearing what you have to say about the program.
- CYNDI KLEINBART: 00:58 Yeah. I'm so glad to be here, Jessica.
- GANGA: 00:59 Can you briefly talk about your background as a chef?
- KLEINBART: 01:02 I was invited to do a luncheon at my synagogue, actually for a friend, and it went so well that I decided, "I'm going to start a catering business." So I was in a catering business for about 10 years. It was called Busy Bee Catering, located in Princeton. And at the same time, I was also teaching in the evenings and part-time for both students that were of school age and adults for various subjects in the Jewish studies realm. When this job came up, Soups and Sweets, I realized I could have both of my passions in one job, teaching and cooking. So it was the perfect mix for me of everything that I wanted to do. And quite honestly, it is the best job I've ever had. It gives me pleasure from when I'm there to when I'm home, thinking of a new curriculum to thinking about my students and following them and their successes. So it's really been a great match for all of us.
- GANGA: 01:57 Where did the idea behind Soups and Sweets Culinary Training Program come from? And then how did you bring your background in being a chef to the program?
- KLEINBART: 02:09 The program actually started in 2013, and I didn't come on until 2019, when it had already been established. The special needs department of the Samost Jewish Family and Children's Service is a very diversified organization that really looks to the large community to see how they can fulfill their needs. And Barbara Abrams, who is a director of the Special Needs Program, kept getting requests from clients that they wanted to work in the culinary arts field. So she was at her committee, developed this program from the ground up. In the country at this point, it was a very novel idea. There was a program in Maryland called Sunflower Café that they based this new program loosely upon. Both of the programs that were beginning at that time really worked the employment of clients with disabilities, but they didn't maximize the potentials of the students that had higher abilities. So most of the students, although they worked in kitchens, they were doing things such as bagging items and cleaning dishes and cleaning floors, and serving. We aim much higher than that, where we

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actually teach the students to use weights and measures and knife skills and oven skills and stovetop cooking. They know how to make roux and sauces and soups and mirepoix. We really have a universal program that teaches them how to work in virtually any commercial kitchen that is out there. They also get credentialed in the ServSafe Food Handler's program, which is actually a real big plus for them when they go looking for jobs.

GANGA: 03:50

Besides the cooking skills that you just described that they receive, what other skills do these students gain by being a part of the program?

KLEINBART: 03:59

The program is 200 hours over the course of 6 months. During that time, we have about a dozen hours at a minimum for what we call soft skills. How to be professional, hygiene, how to work as a team player, body mechanics. And those are classroom lectures. And they are really taught at the beginning of the 200 hours. And then we work throughout the 200 hours incorporating those soft skills into the kitchen, teaching students really how to get along with each other, how to respect authority, how to deal with difficult issues that may come up between their supervisors and/or their peers. And we actually individualize the training as needed for each of the students because each of our students comes with an issue or more, and they're not necessarily the same issues. So we really do try to individualize our training, particularly with these soft skills.

GANGA: 05:02

It sounds like the students gain a very well-rounded education through the program.

KLEINBART: 05:08

Yes. That's our goal.

GANGA: 05:11

Are they trained by professional chefs?

KLEINBART: 05:14

I am the professional chef, not CIA certified, but I am the professional chef, having had not only 10 years' experience in catering but also, I do many online classes for various organizations. So yes, they have that. We also have a full-time occupational therapist that works with them, particularly in selecting the students and working with their individual need. And her name is Nancy, and she's wonderful. We also have a team of volunteers that works. Often, some students need one on one or closer attention. So the team of volunteers, many of them who are in the special needs field - occupational therapists, speech therapists, or others like that - that work with the students on an as-needed basis. Fortunately, the special needs program that I work with has an amazing employment specialist department where students are, from the get-go, are given a specialist that works with them in terms of identifying their strengths and weaknesses and then helping them to find employment. Students are required actually as best as we can require that to find employment within six months of graduation. And they are assisted in that by the specialist who also works with them after they've found a job coaching them. Depending on the need of the individual student and their position, this coach specialist helps find them the employment and works with them to make sure they are successful in the job that they achieve. We tell our students that they are with us for life. That we are their family. That once they come into the program, we don't let them go. We are proud of all of them. We bring them back for graduations for future students. We interact with them. Especially over COVID, we've invited all of our students past and present to

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participate in events that allow them to feel part of a community and supported and loved. So I think there is a really good community that we're building that gives the students and their families a sense of belonging and a sense that there's someone that they can reach out to in our program so that they're not on their own, especially if a job falls through or with COVID, particularly that there's issues, they have a place where they can go back to.

GANGA: 07:28

You sound very passionate about what you do, and it sounds like a great program. How can someone with a disability sign up to be a part of the program? And do people need to be a member of the Jewish Family and Children's Services of Southern New Jersey?

KLEINBART: 07:41

No, they definitely do not need to be a member of the Jewish community. In fact, most of our students are not. Many of our students come through either DDD or DVR in the state. That's not my expertise. I have to be honest with you. That's more of the expertise of my supervisor, Barbara Abrams, and my partner, Nancy Lewis. So there is some funding that comes through those agencies. We also have some high school students that come in their Post High School year in the South Jersey area. So that again is not my expertise. But if you are interested, you can reach out to Barbara Abrams in our special needs department at Samost Jewish Family and Children's Services. This program is very different from some of the other special needs programs in that this type of culinary arts program - we've looked around and we compared and we've worked with other programs - are never self-sustaining. They always require grant funding and other funding. We get part of our funding from the state when they place students with us, but we are really heavily dependent on donors and the community to support the program. Currently, we are pivoting a little bit in what we're going to be doing after we open up from this COVID waystation that we've been in for the last year in that we are now going to start providing food for at least the local and maybe expand more than that if we can food banks. So that was never one of our missions. We did catering, and we were selling our product to support ourselves. But now we're going to try to promote our food in the local food pantries. So that's a brand-new mission that we're going to start when we open up again. And we think that'll help us achieve more of the mission that we urgently set out to do, which was give a very universal education to our students.

GANGA: 09:35

It sounds like you're giving back to the community as well, which is great. What are some of the places students end up working for after completing their training with Soups and Sweets?

KLEINBART: 09:50

We're local in the South Jersey area and when finding them jobs, we have to consider their transportation needs, their ability to get to jobs, the hours that the students can work. So with all that again, the employment specialists and coaches work with them to find what works best for them. But we have gotten them into local restaurants, supermarkets, institutional facilities, such as nursing homes, at day-care centers. They've worked at Chick-fil-A, Chickie's & Pete's, the Bonefish Grill, country clubs, marketplaces, Whole Foods, Rastelli's market, Rock Hill restaurant, Wawa. And we've had really good success. I think it would be worthwhile to note that since we've been open, we've placed about 90 students, which is approximately 80 to 85 percent

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success rate. And for this market with special needs, we're way above the 19% employment for students with special needs. I feel like we've been very, very successful in getting jobs that really maximize their potential. Again, that's the most important thing for my team is to not just get jobs, but get jobs that give these students a sense of fulfillment and their families. To give the family's pride, to let them know that we are going to really let these students challenge themselves. And we don't accept no for an answer. We tell employers, "They can use knives, they can make a soup, they can do all these great things." And we really, really follow through on that promise to the students and their families.

GANGA: 11:28 Are people able to purchase the baked goods, and the food created by the students? And if so, how can people do that?

KLEINBART: 11:36 Prior to the COVID shutdown, that's how we funded a portion of our program. Like I said, the program is not sustainable, but we were able to make a percentage back by doing catering. We've decided for a number of reasons to pivot and we are going to be reopening without the catering and sales part of our program right now because we feel the need to stock the shelves of the food pantries is of utmost importance right now. We have to see how that goes and whether we'll be able to do both. But currently, we're not selling the product. Our products, by the way, we're very, very popular and a lot of the community is upset that we're not going to be selling it. But we really feel like we want to make sure that we're fulfilling the mission of the program first and then look at whether we can do more with the sales at a later date.

GANGA: 12:26 I saw that you created a Soups and Sweets Cookbook. Can you tell us a little bit about the cookbook and why you created it?

KLEINBART: 12:34 I have to tell you that we had this great team that came together again during the COVID shutdown and we wanted to keep the program relevant. We wanted to make sure that people didn't forget us. In our community, Soups and Sweets is one of the most popular programs because people were able to see the students out there. They were able to see the mission. It was sort of very tangible. But once we were on the shutdown, we didn't want people to forget about us, so we decided to do a cookbook. We all wanted to do something that was very unique. So I think we did create a very unique cookbook. And based upon the sales, I think the community really responded well. The cookbook is made up of basically three parts. One is really our story, talking about our commitment to the students and the community, about educating the community about special needs adults and the way that they could fit into the community as a whole and both the students and the community can benefit. The other part is our recipes. And the recipes of Soups and Sweets have been held under lock and key for a number of years for good reason. We decided at this point we're going to open that up and give out the recipes. Make the recipes open to the community. So we did that, which was a major undertaking to take commercial sizing and put them into a home kitchen environment, which took a lot of work by a lot of very committed volunteers. So the recipes are almost entirely Soups and Sweets recipes. There are a few thrown in by our volunteers. Because we're not selling anymore, it actually is a way for people if they really want to eat the Soups and Sweets products they can do that through the cookbook. The third part of the

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cookbook is what I'm very, very proud of is where we took our curriculum and we put it into a format for chefs of any level, and we started with basic things like knife skills, weights and measures, how to crack an egg, how to whip cream, all of the basics. And it really is a how-to. In all the cookbooks I've ever read in my life, and I've read a lot, I'd never found anything quite like it where they really go into the basics. How to use a dry measure versus a wet measure and how to use a scale and what's the difference between weight and volume. And this is exactly what we teach our students we are teaching to the community. And I find that that made this book very, very unique in the cookbook market. And we've sold out. We did really, really well on the sales.

- GANGA: 15:01 I'm not surprised. I myself like to cook, so this sounds like something that I would definitely want to use as well. So congratulations on that.
- KLEINBART: 15:09 Thank you. Thank you.
- GANGA: 15:11 Will the cookbook be available again for people to purchase if they're interested?
- KLEINBART: 15:16 So the answer currently is no. Again, we're pivoting to a more universal curriculum, making much more products that are of the savory as opposed to the sweet, which is what Soups and Sweets originally was. I am very confident that we will be writing a second edition. Similar but different in that we're going to have much more savory recipes. But that's not on the agenda for the immediate future.
- GANGA: 15:43 Gotcha. Well, I'll still be on the lookout for that because that sounds like it'll be just as good as the first one. How do grants from donors like Kessler Foundation help the program continue?
- KLEINBART: 15:55 I'm not really involved in the financial issues of the program, but I do know that, again, we've looked around. This program cannot be self-sustaining. We get from the state a small stipend per student, but the cost of running the program is quite high. We've done everything we can to shave the costs, especially now that we're going back. Without donors, the program would not exist. I don't think that's hyperbole. It really is important that we have our donors for this program. I think we do really well compared to some other programs, actually in terms of what we do for ourselves. We had the catering before and now we're trying to get grants to cover the food pantry. But without the donations of our committed community, there would not be a Soups and Sweets program. Unfortunately, I think that's why there's so few of these programs around. And if you look into programs which call themselves culinary training, they aren't really what we do. There's very few of the programs that actually do what we do for the students at the highest level of learning and employment. So we are very thankful for Kessler in many, many, many ways and we are there hopefully going forward into the future as partners in this.
- GANGA: 17:09 So my last question for you, Cyndi, is why do you enjoy working for the Soups and Sweets Culinary Training?
- KLEINBART: 17:18 We happened to be videoing the students for something. And one of our students who's actually one of the most difficult I've had because a lot of them want the feeling of belonging in addition to being able to learn a skill. And she said, "The only reason I get up in the morning is so I can come to Soups and Sweets." And I looked at

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my partner, Nancy, and the two of us with tears in our eyes shook her head. And I said to the student, "You know what? That's the same reason that I get up in the morning to come here and be with you and know that what we're doing is a good thing and know that we're changing lives and know that we're doing it all together." It is truly the most wonderful job I've had because we can give back, but we get so much. It's cliché, but we get so much back from the students. And the families, some of them, really have felt like they don't have options and now have options. Words can't even describe how much that means to all of us.

GANGA: 18:14

Soups and Sweets sounds like a wonderful program. You are wonderful as well, Cyndi. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to speak with us today about the training program. We really appreciate it.

KLEINBART: 18:29

Thank you again, Kessler, for making that possible. If anyone wants to come and visit us and see what we do, please. We're open. We love company. We love visitors. We're very proud of what we do, so we like to show it off. [music]

BANKS-SMITH: 18:44

With grant funding from Kessler Foundation and your support, Soups, and Sweets has helped secure jobs for people living with disabilities in professional kitchens throughout New Jersey. To learn more about Soups and Sweets and Kessler Foundation's grant funding, links are in the program notes. Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure to subscribe to our SoundCloud channel Kessler Foundation for more stories like these. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded on Friday, September 10th, 2021 remotely and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, Creative Producer for Kessler Foundation.