

Ready for the working world

Community Resources program readies disabled for culinary careers

Peeling and chopping vegetables, learning to mold a crab cake, checking the heat of the grill and then reaching over to stir the beginnings of a sauce for the Chicken Cacciatore — it's all part of the day's routine for chef/instructor Anthony Conio.

The Tottenville resident works with the 10 students currently enrolled in the work readiness program at Community Resources (CR), a not-for-profit agency serving the developmentally and learning disabled, in Travis.

"The first six months, it's a basic preparation program. They're taught all the sanitation and skill techniques I learned in culinary school," said Conio. A graduate of New York City Technical College's hospitality program in Brooklyn, he worked as a chef in several restaurants and hotels in the New York area before taking on the role of teacher. "Sometimes we'll make Pasta Fagioli or grilled chicken on Caesar Salad," said the chef, who grew up in Oakwood. "We make it all, and it's always fresh."

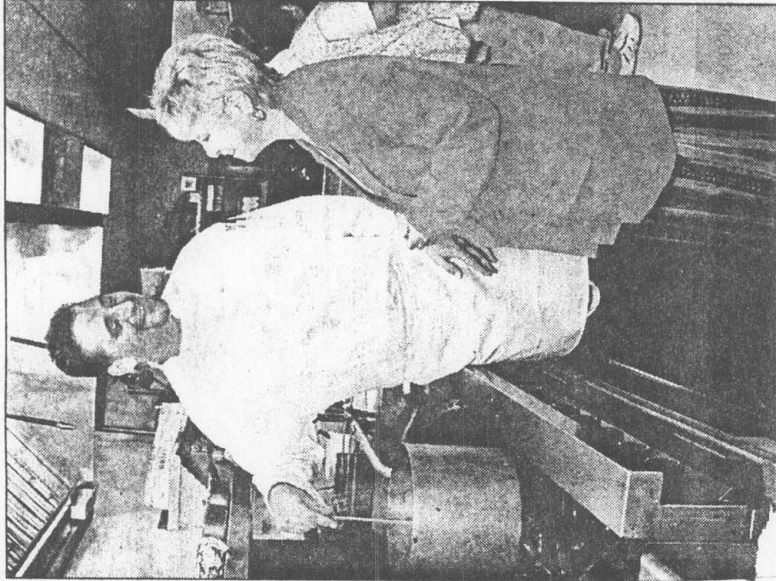
"They learn how to buy fresh vegetables, how to blanch and package foods for freezer storage, how to prepare fish, to grill and make sauces. We drill it, day after day, Monday through Thursday. Friday is our lecture day."



JANE
MILZA
FOOD EDITOR

By his side as the chef spoke was Christopher Fazio, the first student to enroll in the program and Conio's prized pupil. That day, the two had just finished making apple turnovers. "I like making desserts; they're fun to make," said Fazio, who admitted he likes the busy pace of the kitchen work. "There's always something to do; I like it here," said the trainee.

"He's really like my assistant," said Conio, proudly. As part of the program, Fazio is assembling a book of recipes based on the items prepared in the cafeteria. The chef plans to color code it, so the recipes will be more accessible.



At left, Anthony Conio is busy while talking with Marlene Ruggiero, director of program services for Community Resources. Below, Christopher Fazio serves Dana Magee, executive director, Barbara Mercado, associate executive director, and Marlene Ruggiero.

"It's very rewarding," said Conio, looking over the kitchen's state-of-the-art equipment. The work area adjoins the cafeteria where more than 200 of Community Resources' clients and staff pass by sometime during each day.

"There's nothing so fulfilling as working with people who are excited about their work," said Conio, summing up the program that builds skills and confidence in enrollees. "It's like giving something back. I don't think I'll ever go back to restaurant work."

"They get hands-on instruction in techniques, hygiene and safety in the kitchen as well as a lecture

series," explained Marlene Ruggiero, Community Resources' director of program services. "Hopefully, as it grows, more people coming right out of high school will enroll. Besides gaining all the skills, it helps them build the self esteem they need to work competitively."

This phase of the New York City-funded work readiness program at the Victory Boulevard complex serves young people who are interested in working in the food service industry. The agency follows through as clients finish the program, helping them find jobs in restaurants, delis or with caterers — depending on their talents and the job requirements.

"The program is open, not just to CR clients, but for anyone who is developmentally or learning disabled," according to Ms. Ruggiero. Graduates of special programs in New Dorp, Tottenville and Susan Wagner high schools already have sought acceptance.

The kitchen starts humming early in the morning. Chef Conio and his crew have a full breakfast ready, beginning at 7 a.m. By 11 a.m., they're set to serve the first wave of lunch patrons. Mid-morning, and again later in the day, people in the vocational training workshop will stroll in for snacks during their break time.

Besides satisfying himself that the menu — which changes daily — is prepared fresh and has plenty of taste appeal, Conio also has available special items to meet certain dietary needs, including diabetic, high cholesterol, low-salt and calorie restrictions.

Among the menu selections on a recent day were freshly made beef-vegetable soup and an assortment of entrees, including Rigatoni Siciliana, scrod stuffed with crabmeat, crab cakes and Eggplant Rollatine. String beans and parsley potatoes were available as side dishes, while grilled mozzarella and tomato sandwiches were offered "from the grill."

Some students are enrolled part time, while others put in a full day in the kitchen. "They're not paid, so they really have to be dedicated," explained Ms. Ruggiero.

"The primary focus are those who are at least 17 years old and have graduated from high school, and for one reason or another, can't make the transition from high school to competitive employment because they lack social skills or job skills. We then come in with an initial assessment, taking all those factors into account."

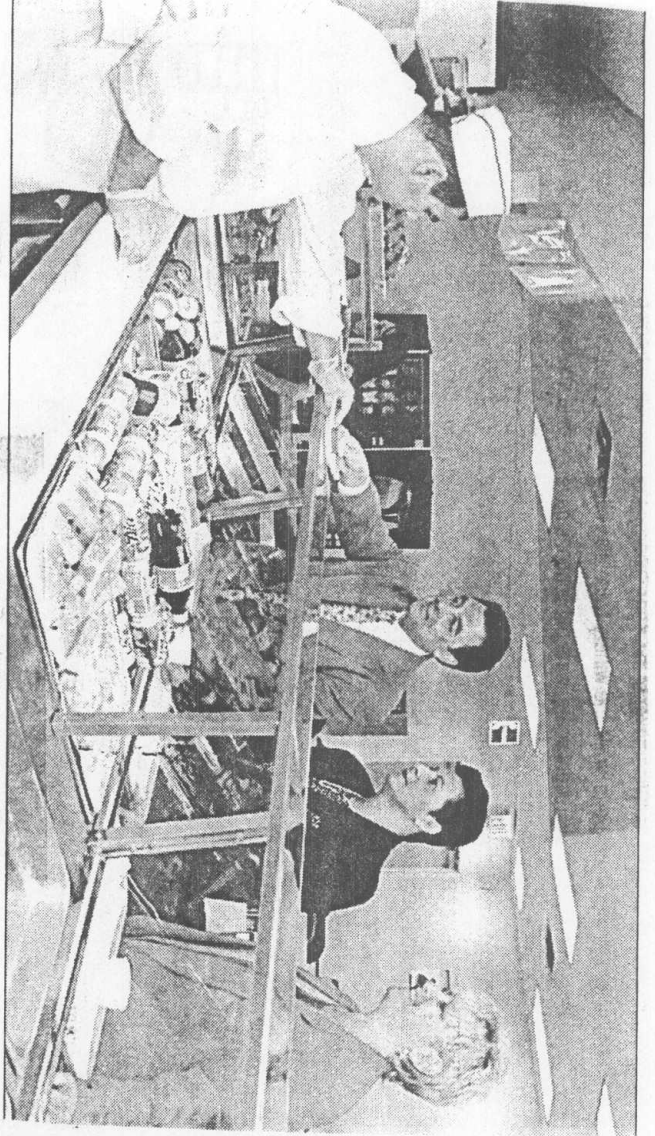
Launched last December, the program also includes two other phases — training in basic auto mechanics and in office and clerical skills. "The assessment determines the length of time each person will spend in the program," Ms. Ruggiero noted. "My own thoughts are that, if they must stay beyond 18 months, they need another program."

Dana Magee, executive director

of CR who is equally enthusiastic about the progress being made, said: "This is one of the first programs we considered when we moved into our new site." The new building was completed a year ago.

"Job finders are built into the readiness program to help clients find jobs when they finish," said Magee. "Too many times people who are developmentally or learning delayed fall through the cracks. They're pushed through the system, and never get a chance to achieve. This program will teach them the skills and work ethics they need to succeed."

Community Resources, formerly located in Tompkinsville, was started by concerned parents in 1953 under the name Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children, Inc. It now is one of Staten Island's oldest agencies, servicing the developmentally and learning disabled.



Besides the work readiness programs and sheltered workshop, CR offers at its vocational training center in Travis day treatment and day habilitation programs, and also is responsible for weekend respite and recreation programs as well as community residences at various Staten Island sites. The agency also operates a pre-school center in Richmond, providing both general and special education programs.

Although it already has reached a measure of success, the staff never stops working to expand the work readiness program. Barbara Devaney, director of development and community relations, has several grant proposals circulating. Keyspan Energy, formerly Brooklyn Union Gas, agreed to a \$5,000 grant to purchase kitchen equipment, and United Way has promised \$7,300 for equipment and to supplement the secretarial skills part of the program.

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