

Kitchen of Life provides job skills, social, emotional learning

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For Shea Kaltmann, his parents' experiences in Australia served as an inspiration for Kitchen of Life, a program that teaches culinary skills while providing social and emotional learning opportunities.

When Kaltmann's parents, Rabbi Areyah and Esther Kaltmann visited Australia several years ago they were inspired by Our Big Kitchen program in Sydney, which prepares 250,000 or so meals each year to thousands of people, while serving more than 33 charities.

"They saw a certain atmosphere that was created when people gathered together to cook for a greater cause," Kaltmann, Kitchen of Life's director, told the Columbus Jewish News. "We thought, how do we harness this amazing group energy to create a space that offers teenagers an opportunity to foster social and mental well-being?"

His family has long run LifeTown, which provides life skills for children with special needs.

From that inspiration, the Bexley-based Kitchen of Life was born. The program, which launches Aug. 2 at 2525 E. Main St. in Bexley, is meant to provide teenagers with job training and emotional support. Kitchen of Life will formally open its doors in September with classes scheduled for Bexley middle and high schools.

Kaltmann said he is working with Stephen Gavazzi, director of CHRR



Interior of the Kitchen of Life facility in Bexley. | Photo / Shea Kaltmann

at The Ohio State University on the evaluation of the curriculum. Cameron Mitchell, founder and CEO of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants is helping with the recipes and the culinary arts aspect of the program.

Jeffrey Schottenstein, CEO of the TACKMA sportswear brand, said in a statement provided to the CJN that he believes in the project as its work aligns with his mental wellness program at Ohio State.

"This is something which is very close to my heart," Schottenstein said. "To me, Kitchen of Life, is an extension of the work we are committed to at The Ohio State University Jeffrey Schottenstein Program for Resilience, empowering students with tools of growth and resiliency in a safe space with no stigma."

According to a news release announcing the program, participants will be part of "a program that offers a creative and welcoming space where teenagers from all backgrounds can gain new skills in culinary arts

while being granted access to the life-enhancing tenets of social emotional learning and connectedness."

According to the nonprofit Committee for Children, social and emotional learning is "the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work and life success."

The current curriculum includes classes five-days a week and is expected to average 5,000 student visits throughout the year, in the former Bexley Premier Restaurant, located near Columbus's public schools, the release said. The program also aims to help improve nutrition and combat food insecurity for the more than 3,000 children suffering from homelessness in the Columbus area.

Students will not only cook together but sit down and enjoy the results of their work together "exposing them to socialization and creativity while providing a social and emotional boost," Kaltmann said.

He said the program's goals are "to further teenagers' community engagement, socialization, belonging



Kaltmann



Morison



Schottenstein

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

and teamwork in a positive environment to develop resilience skills.”

Such experiences are especially important given the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic took on students, he said.

Kaltmann said when students were forced out of schools due to the pandemic, many of the social, nutritional and institutional reliance issues they were facing were pushed to the forefront. One of the aims of the Kitchen is to address these issues.

And such coping mechanisms benefit everyone, he said.

“I try to stress to people that resiliency skills aren’t something that only select teenagers need,” Kaltmann said. “We all need resilience to overcome the adversities of life. Kitchen of Life offers a way for all youth to feel connected, supported and empowered.” Jed W. Morison, superintendent and CEO of the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities, believes the program will make a positive difference.

He told the CJN, “Students will build emotional literacy and a toolbox of skills from their time spent in the Kitchen of Life through questions and reflections

about how to deal with failure by coming together as a group and a community and by learning to feel interdependence, independence and empathy. We are excited about this unique initiative and look forward to how it will benefit youth in a number of ways, including resiliency, socialization, skill building, and improved feelings of self.”

The program has already garnered support from Gov. Mike DeWine.

“With the new Kitchen of Life program, students will expand their knowledge by not only creating meals and learning about health and nutrition, but by learning about decision-making, independence and empathy,” the release quoted him as saying. “This hands-on, interactive experience will spark both traditional learning and critical soft skills. These skills will help students live up to their God-given potential and truly succeed throughout their lives.”

Erika Clark Jones, CEO of the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board of Franklin County is also supporting the initiative. “Lifetown has created a new, useful, and long lasting skill building program to help foster confidence and resiliency,” she said in the release. “The Kitchen of Life has an opportunity to

save lives by providing an innovative way to support individual development and offer a safe space with no stigma, which ultimately saves lives.”

Kaltmann said the next step for the program is to recruit volunteers to work with students.

“We are looking for volunteers who will assist with the cooking experience,” Kaltmann said. “If someone or their company is interested please fill out a form on our website kolc.org to let us know that they can help. We have corporate and individual volunteers from around Columbus that will be present during Kitchen of Life to help the students with the cooking and to offer support. It is very important to us that when a teenager asks for help with the recipe in Kitchen of Life there will be an adult there who says ‘Yes, I can help you’ and offer solutions. We will encourage the teenagers to use this learning experience to advocate for themselves outside Kitchen of Life as well.”

For more information and to apply for the program, visit kolc.org.

Noell Wolfgram Evans is a freelance journalist.