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## Kitchen of Life to teach students resiliency through MasterChef-style cooking experience

By Danae King

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

When area middle and high school students walk into the Kitchen of Life this fall, they may feel like they've walked onto the set of "MasterChef."

That's because the culinary program, created and hosted by the Lori Schottenstein Chabad Center in New Albany, will use cooking stations similar to those on the hit TV show to teach children about cooking and resiliency.

"Food is a medium that every person in this world has to be involved with it," said Rabbi Areyah Kaltmann, executive director of the center. "It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter from what demographic you come from in society, you've got to eat food and food transcends all denominations, everything."

For the students, specially-designed lessons in social emotional learning will be baked into the curriculum and the dishes they're creating.

Whitehall City Schools is among the first districts to sign on and plans to introduce the program to freshmen in the fall.

*"For us, it ties into everything that we are trying to build. It's essential to our work."*

**SHAREE WELLS, WHITEHALL CITY SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT**

Sharee Wells, district superintendent, said she is enthusiastic about programs that take students out of traditional classrooms and put them in an environment where they can see and learn differently.

"For us, it ties into everything that we are trying to build," she said. "It's essential to our work."

Kaltmann and his wife, Esther, got the idea for Kitchen of Life several years ago after a visit to Australia, where the rabbi is from. In Sydney they toured a community kitchen called Our Big Kitchen. It has a different model than what will happen locally, but it inspired the Kaltmanns to use cooking for a purpose.



Shea Kaltmann stands inside the cooking-activity room as construction continues to transform a restaurant into Kitchen of Life, a culinary facility in Bexley for youth between the ages of 12 and 18 that focuses on social emotional learning. Kaltmann is the director of the program, which is expected to be up and running in the fall. [ADAM CAIRNS/DISPATCH]

"I saw there's something with cooking, with baking. There's a magic," Areyah Kaltmann said. "We're taking this magical cooking touch and just using it in a medium where we can implant resiliency skills, and we all need resiliency. There's not one teenager who will walk through our doors who won't benefit from our program."

Esther Kaltmann said the Australian program showed them how cooking could bring people together.

"So we thought, 'How we could apply such a concept here? What was the biggest need in Columbus?'" she said. "Ever since then we've been looking for a space."

The organization purchased the space at 2525 E. Main St. in Bexley — the former home of Bexley Premier Restaurant — in April. The Franklin County Auditor's website reported the sale price as \$2.6 million.

When the program begins in the fall, it will include a social worker and chef working with several trained volunteers. It will be funded by the center and private donations, Areyah Kaltmann said.

Kitchen of Life will offer students ages 12 to 18 a curriculum designed to teach

them resiliency and social emotional learning skills through cooking. Students, in groups of 20 to 25, will come back to the kitchen four times a year for two hours at a time.

The Kaltmanns said one reason they decided to focus on mental health and this age range is because of the increasing number of teens dying by suicide. From 2019 to 2020, the suicide rate among children ages 0 to 19 in Franklin County increased from 4% to 9%, according to the Franklin County Coroner's office.

"We know there's an issue," said Shea Kaltmann, director of Kitchen of Life and the Kaltmanns' son. "We know suicide is an issue, and we want to build resiliency."

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines on building resiliency for teens include increasing connectedness, something Kitchen of Life will do by giving teens opportunities to form bonds and relationships with one another, Shea Kaltmann said.

The Chabad center also hosts LifeTown, located in its New Albany building, a simulated streetscape where young people with disabilities can learn

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skills they'll use in every day life. Neither program is religious, but they host these programs and help people because of the religious belief that "someone else's physical problem is our spiritual mandate," Areyah Kaltmann said.

Each cooking class will have a larger theme: belonging, generosity, independence and mastery.

"These are just different elements of what we call the circle of courage," Shea Kaltmann said. "It's something based on the belief that in order to be healthy everyone needs belonging, generosity, independence and mastery. (And) with cooking we're teaching them how to get along with others and attaining goals with yourself."

For instance, when something goes wrong with a recipe, students will have to think of a way to solve the problem and also perhaps to stand up for themselves by asking an adult for help.

They'll learn belonging when each person in a group has something needed for a recipe and generosity when they're tasked with making a dish for someone else and finding out what they want it to taste like.

Other skills that will be taught include evaluating goals, adapting to changes, persevering through challenges and receiving feedback in a respectful way, Shea Kaltmann said.

Shea Kaltmann, director of Kitchen of Life, shows off the food storage areas and walk-in freezer at the Bexley location where it will open in the fall.

The mastery portion of the program is where the competition part of MasterChef



Shea Kaltmann, director of Kitchen of Life, shows off the food storage areas and walk-in freezer at the Bexley location where it will open in the fall. [ADAM CAIRNS/DISPATCH]

comes in, Shea Kaltmann said, with students making a full meal within a given time limit.

The Chabad center partnered with Global Psychological Services Educational Services in Michigan — an organization that offers educational programming to schools and other organizations — to create the curriculum. It is also working with Stephen Gavazzi, a professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University, to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Other program developers have used the circle of courage, Gavazzi said, though it hasn't been evaluated extensively. He

said he's intrigued by the incorporation of cooking into the curriculum.

"I think what's really innovative here is using cooking as a way of grabbing the attention of children and leading them to certain areas of learning that all children need to learn," Gavazzi said. "It gives them cooking skills, a sense of independence and mastery."

Areyah Kaltmann said he hopes a rigorous evaluation means the program can be replicated elsewhere.

"This is needed desperately," he said. "We don't want our teens to crumble in the face of adversity ... The name is Kitchen of Life because they're going to be learning life skills."

*This story is part of the Dispatch's Mobile Newsroom initiative. Read more of our reporters' work at [dispatch.com/mobilenewsroom](http://dispatch.com/mobilenewsroom), where you also can sign up for The Mobile Newsroom newsletter.*



Construction continues to transform the former Bexley Premier Restaurant at 2525 E. Main St. into Kitchen of Life. Whitehall City Schools is among the first districts to sign on for the program. [ADAM CAIRNS/DISPATCH]