

How cooking is teaching Columbus teens about mental health

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (WCMH) — A new culinary arts program in Bexley is promoting mental health practices by giving Columbus-area teens a creative space to learn new skills.

Kitchen of Life is an initiative that teaches teens social and emotional skills through cooking, spearheaded by LifeTown Columbus — a nonprofit dedicated to providing students opportunities to develop life and pre-employment skills. The idea for the program was born from the family of Shea Kaltmann, who noticed how isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to skyrocketing mental health issues among teenagers.

“We were able to really see the effects COVID-19 has on people — they weren’t able to connect with each other anymore, they were isolated, they felt alone,” said Kaltmann, who serves as director of Kitchen of Life. “Especially in teenagers, we saw their mental health worsen and we wanted to do something about it.”

More than a third of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This led to increased rates of attempted suicide and decreased rates of youth feeling like they belonged at school.



Kitchen of Life is a new program spearheaded by LifeTown Columbus that teaches teens emotional skills through cooking and communicating.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the launch of Kitchen of Life on Aug. 2

The program found its home at 2525 E. Main St. in Bexley and celebrated its launch on Aug. 2. Kitchen of Life has garnered statewide recognition, including support from Gov. Mike DeWine.

“I have visited LifeTown and have seen first-hand the valuable impact of the program,” DeWine said in a release. “This hands-on, interactive experience will spark both traditional learning and critical soft skills.

Kaltmann said the program will offer classes five days a week and expects more than 5,000 student visits throughout the year. Kitchen of Life has connected with a number of local school districts to bring Columbus teens to the program, including Eastmoor, Bexley, Reynoldsburg and Whitehall schools.

Community garden planned for neighborhood at Mid-Ohio Farm at NBC4

Students will be bussed to Kitchen of Life throughout the year to attend four two-hour sessions during the school day. The program is based on a curriculum that hones in on social emotional learning, which allows teens to recognize their emotions and plan strategies on how to work through them, said Kaltmann.

“Interwoven throughout the lesson is an experience where they can be

generous to others, where they can have independence choosing their own recipe,” said Kaltmann.

Each session will be focused on one of four topics: belonging, generosity, independence and mastery. Students will go through the steps of preparing and cooking a meal, then come together to talk through their process. They will discuss how they felt during the lesson, what made them feel heard and supported, and what they wish would’ve been done differently.

Family, friends honor Pelotonia cyclist who died during ride

A staggering number of students go through a mental health crisis once they go to college, said Kaltmann. Emotional crises among college students is only on the rise: depression in college students increased 135% from 2013 to 2021 and anxiety increased 110%, according to a study from Boston University researchers.

Kaltmann hopes the lessons learned from the Kitchen of Life program will be a preventative measure for teens entering the workforce or going to college, and give them the tools to tackle tough situations.

“Instead of waiting for when someone is in crisis mode and doesn’t know where to turn to, and something really awful happens, we’re trying to have a fun, engaging and preventative way to boost self-esteem, connectedness and self image,” said Kaltmann.



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