

Samost JFCS Special Needs Department “Soups and Sweets” Program Enters Second Season

Initiative to teach employment skills to those with special needs now includes catering

Cherry Hill, NJ –January 2014– When it comes to programs helping those with special needs, it doesn't get any sweeter than this. The Soups and Sweets program is a collaboration of the JFCS Special Needs Department and Congregation Beth El. Soups and Sweets is a food service training program designed to provide young adults with special needs an opportunity to gain transferrable culinary skills. The classes take place at the Congregation Beth El kitchen, with instruction by Chef Louis Ruttenberg, and guidance from job mentors. This season, the students are also enjoying putting their skills to work, cooking and baking platters of food in large quantities, as orders for catering are streaming in from all over Southern New Jersey.

“I firmly believe that everyone who wants to find employment should have the opportunity to be trained in the field they choose. To be asked to participate in this program – a vanguard in our area – is an honor,” says Chef Louis Ruttenberg.

The program, now in its second season, offers participants the venue and tools to learn how to work in a kitchen and prepare a variety of soups and desserts and to customers of the Soups and Sweets catering endeavor. Participants procure ingredients, prepare and package the soups and desserts, learn to safely use kitchen utensils and equipment, and are responsible for the maintenance and clean up of the kitchen. They also focus on presentation when preparing catering platters, and gain hands-on experience with the business side of running a kitchen, from pricing to ordering ingredients.

For 20-year-old John Profaci of Mt. Laurel, completion of this program in June brought the opportunity to work closely with his immediate family, which owns and operates a food business. John's brother and sister-in-law even met in culinary school, and are both chefs. You could say that for John, this program was part of a family affair. John's mother, Gracia Profaci, said, “He's was so excited to be learning the skills. Most kids his age are in college, so this gave him an accomplishment and training that he, too, could be proud of. Our entire family is so into cooking, so it means a lot to him and us. As a child, he loved to cook and we're so excited for him that he's getting back into it!”

“The overall goal of the Soups and Sweets program is to increase paid employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. JFCS is a supported employment vendor with the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Division of Developmental Disabilities,” says Barbara Abrams, Director of the JFCS Special Needs Department. “Through the years, JFCS provided employment support to many individuals pursuing employment in the food services industry. Unfortunately, there are limited training opportunities in this field. The Soups and Sweets program addresses this deficiency by establishing a curriculum whereby trainees work toward developing and attaining specific food service competencies. “A wonderful addition has been the growth of the Soups and Sweets catering business, which has given us the opportunity to hire back our graduates to work with us in catering. They have also found employment at establishments such as Iron Hill Brewery, Lionsgate Continuing Care Facility and Lutheran Care of Moorestown.”

The Soups and Sweets program, supported with funding from the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, the Wright Cook Foundation, and an anonymous gift from a family foundation, will offer 200 training hours to individuals with special needs. The training of participants will take place two times per week, for four hours per day. At the completion of the six month program, participants receive a certificate indicating they have mastered competencies. JFCS will then assist with job placement in the food industry, in restaurants, cafeterias, hotels and healthcare kitchens. To become involved in the Soups and Sweets program, please call Barbara Abrams at 856-424-1333, xt. 1182 or email to specialneeds@jfedsnj.org