

Denver culinary skills program cooks up hope for life after social services

Dominique Hill was determined to achieve a new goal: cook a meal her children would love.

“I’ve always wanted to make something my kids liked and wanted to eat,” Hill said. “I have some skills, but they’re not always impressed by my seasonings.”

During an eight-month stay at an emergency shelter in Denver, Hill joined an eight-week Culinary Skills Program for individuals receiving services from the nearby [Harbor Light Center](#).



The course is a component of The Salvation Army Employment Pathways Program, designed to enhance employment eligibility through targeted training and hands-on experience.

For participants, the program offers a [stepping stone to a hopeful future](#).

“They put a roof over our heads and helped us get on our feet,” Hill said. “They’re also setting me up to find a job in the restaurant industry.”

Participants like Hill collaborate with a job coach to identify their training pathway based on personal employment goals and interests. In addition to employment coaching, individuals select training options to enhance culinary skills, office work or warehouse work.

With a job coach, participants establish goals, refine resumes, hone interview skills, apply for scholarships and educational programs and receive support throughout the job search process.

“It’s a lot of support at once,” said Hill, who has always found interest in kitchen work.

“People are walking away with skills and education so that they feel confident to go out there and get a job. It’s amazing to see this program leading others to a fulfilled life.”

Chef James Prunty

During the fifth week of the Culinary Skills Program, she prepared a pork stir fry in class and brought it home for her son to try.

“He just loved it,” she said. “Chinese food is one of his favorites. I can save some money now by making this at home.”

She said learning new recipes to substitute take-out has been a game-changer for her family’s budget.

Hill’s story is a part of what Chef James Prunty hoped for when he spearheaded the creation of the Culinary Skills program in late 2022.

For 10 years, [Prunty has prepared meals for shelter guests](#) through The Salvation Army Harbor Light Center. He said he always felt fulfilled cooking for others but often sensed he could do more.

“Every time I walked into one of our shelters, I would think, ‘[What can I do to help someone succeed in this place?](#)’” he said.

He helped design the program to train and prepare individuals for employment in the restaurant industry and instill confidence through acquiring new culinary skills. Once students complete the course, they receive a SafeServ certificate, an eight-piece knife set and a personalized culinary jacket.

Now, Prunty spends Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings guiding a group of six students on average per session through the intricacies of preparing flavorful dishes using proper techniques.



Culinary Skills Program students learn baking techniques while making a cake. Courtesy Chef James Prunty.

A year after the program began, Prunty reported a 50 percent employment rate for culinary students who completed the Employment Pathway program.

“People are walking away with skills and education so that they feel confident to go out there and get a job,” Prunty said. “It’s amazing to see this program leading others to a fulfilled life.”

And for Prunty, it goes beyond simply teaching someone to cook. It’s about assisting individuals in uncovering their abilities and strengths as they progress in their journeys.

“I like to build a connection with students during the process,” Prunty said. “I usually ask myself, ‘What can I do to change their life?’”

He emphasized the importance of being a supportive listener and ensuring students know he’s there to offer assistance, regardless of the situation.

“My heart has always guided me to helping others,” Prunty said. “I have these skills, so it’s always felt like my duty to share them with individuals I come in contact with.”

Prunty said his knowledge and love of cooking stems from his late mother and brother.

“They were outstanding chefs and I was gifted this way because of them,” he said. “Now, it’s what motivates me and drives me to do what I do because they live beside me, and I fulfill their legacy through cooking.”

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