

PHOTO SLIDESHOW: Cicero youth dabble with culinary arts



By Sidney Thoms

Eighth-grader Jasmin Garcia of Cicero pours water while bussing tables for a “customer” at Corazon Community Services’ youth center April 10, when the place turned into a restaurant for evening.

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By Ellyn Ong Vea, eovea@mysuburbanlife.com
 Cicero Life
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Cicero, IL -

A nice tablecloth was draped over the pool table used as a buffet surface at the youth center, which turned into an exclusive, sit-down restaurant for one evening.

Cosy square bistro tables clothed with white linens replaced a lounge area of worn couches, and teens turned in their t-shirts and jeans for blouses, button-ups and dark slacks.

Corazon Community Services, an active Cicero nonprofit serving young people and their families, hopes more events like the restaurant night April 10 will soon become a full-fledged program for youth to try a hand at the culinary arts.

Miguel A. Zambrano, 18, of Cicero, said Corazon helped him discover his desired career as a chef, and he is now almost through with his first year in the culinary arts program at Kendall College in Chicago.

"Programs like these help kids see that there's more out there than the typical office jobs," he said. "And people might realize that they actually like to cook and could add to their skill set — or at least learn how to feed themselves. I know a lot of friends away (at college), and they go out to eat for most of the week because they don't know how to cook; that's not really beneficial."

When Zambrano was more involved with Corazon before going to Kendall, he and other youth volunteered at a chocolate-centered dessert convention and visited the Fench Pastry School in Chicago.

Also, before the Greater Chicago Food Depository started providing snacks for the group, the youth used to cook their own snacks and meals together.

Now, for events like the April 10 restaurant night, Corazon is teaming up with the Chicago-based organization Purple Asparagus, a community resource for food-related activities, education and fun for families.

The youth dabble with cooking and presenting the food, as well as hosting and waiting on and bussing tables. They invited their parents and served them the Middle Eastern food they had mastered with the help of a chef from Purple Asparagus.

Gladys Arizmendi, 14, said she was pleasantly surprised at how the chef could help the kids to see that recipe instructions that seemed complicated on paper weren't so hard to carry out.

"The chef would say, 'See all this (pointing to the recipe), you just did this.' And we'd say, 'Really?'" she said. "And (the chef) didn't take over if we were doing something wrong — she'd show us the right way. I liked that. I thought I didn't know what I was doing, but then I did."

Corazon program coordinator Ricardo Aguinaga said the group will try to work with Purple Asparagus more and eventually grow the food-related activities into one of Corazon's learning programs to add to their current fitness, fine arts, independent arts and writing "institutes."

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