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Roosevelt and Elijah's Promise Cook-Up a Coalition

MIDDLESEX COUNTY – Two local organizations known for servicing Middlesex County's struggling residents have recently forged a partnership, much to the benefit of workforce development.

Middlesex County's Roosevelt Care Center, two long-term care facilities in Edison and Old Bridge that support the region's aging population, are now collaborating with Elijah's Promise, a New Brunswick-based nonprofit on a mission to feed and empower area residents.

For its part, Elijah's Promise operates a soup kitchen, a catering business, a café and a culinary arts school, the last of which began deploying students to Roosevelt Care Center for a bit of on-site job training last fall.

"It's important for students who've never worked in food service," said Annemarie Cooke, an Elijah's Promise instructor and job developer. "They've got book learning and practice in the kitchen. Now they need to step into the real world and into the food service industry."

As part of the Promise Culinary School's six-month course load, students are taught to prepare, store and serve food to the public and are further required to complete an 80-hour externship prior to graduating. Elijah's Promise launched the joint venture in August with two-week internships at the Middlesex County Improvement Authority-run Roosevelt facility in Edison.

This, however, is not a first encounter for the MCIA and Elijah's Promise.

Their relationship dates back more than a decade, as representatives from both the soup kitchen and the Authority-managed County food bank have corroborated on several initiatives to supply regional emergency food relief.

New Brunswick native and current Bound Brook resident, Lance Hawkins was one of the initial students to test out his culinary skills in Roosevelt's institutional setting.

"The food at Roosevelt is better than what you'd expect in a hospital," he said. "Lots of cooking from scratch and the patients seem to appreciate that...It's not like throwing vegetables into a pot of water – you have to chop them [and] sauté those to build flavor."

Hawkins noted that Roosevelt's friendly staff contributed to an overall enjoyable experience, as did the opportunity "to make good food for folks, who need to have good food."

Since Hawkins' departure from Roosevelt, a handful of students have followed suit, looking to join the hundreds who've kick-started careers in the kitchen through Promise Culinary School during its 15-year-plus history.

"This is a partnership that was born from strong community ties and of mutual benefit," said Dr. Frank Damiani, an administrator for Roosevelt Care Center at Edison. "We are so grateful for the extra hands and can't think of a more worthy cause than to help members of our community get on their professional feet."

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