Caridad Community Kitchen
Feeds the Hungry
by Claire Rogers

The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona provides prepared daily meals to anyone who needs them. They are in the form of 300 to 400 sack lunches or hot meals that are distributed through area churches and the Food Bank’s Caridad Community Kitchen, which is the hive preparing all that food. In addition, Caridad contracts with Pima Meals on Wheels to prepare up to 1,000 meals daily for the elderly and disabled. By the end of each month the kitchen has produced 32,000 meals. And then the work for the next month begins.

To address some of the many factors of poverty, Caridad Community Kitchen is investing in people who need a job yet lack job skills. The Culinary Training Program is a full-time 10-week course that prepares those with problematic work histories to return to a productive livelihood with the life skills, self-confidence, and certification to work at entry-level jobs in the food-service industry.

So far, the program has graduated 28 classes, providing Tucson with 185 skilled culinary workers. To qualify, applicants need to be functionally literate, meet low-income requirements, be drug free for the last six months, and clear a four-step screening process.

After a preliminary interview and a follow-up interview with instructors and program managers, the third stage is a working interview in the kitchen.

“The third step is to see if they are a good fit with the team, to see how well they take direction, to see if they are coachable, and to ensure they can meet the physical requirements that the job entails,” says Ismael Rascon, chef of culinary training and community meals for the Community Food Bank.

Upon approval in the kitchen, candidates submit to a drug test and background check.

“The fourth step helps us to be sure we’re having honest, transparent conversations with the candidate,” says Megan Black, administrative services manager for the Community Food Bank. “But it also helps us to direct the graduating students to employers who are more supportive of diverse backgrounds.”

In September each member of class number 29, with around a dozen students, will graduate with a food handler’s certificate and the skills necessary for an entry-level position in the local hospitality industry.

Far from providing just food-handling certification, the training includes life skills, time management, prioritization, and communication skills. Tucson Federal Credit Union provides professionals to teach credit management, and law students from the University of Arizona Workers’ Rights Clinic present information about employee rights.

“Our students are amazing, resilient people, and it is a privilege to help them discover their strengths,” says Black. In the face of the hardships each student deals with on a daily basis, both Black and Rascon find themselves continually inspired by the cooperative spirit they see in class members. Some endure hours commuting on public transit to attend class, some work full time outside class, and some are caregivers for family members.

“They share their experiences in a conversational format, so people can learn from others’ experiences,” says Black.

“For me it’s a mentoring type of teaching,” Rascon says. “I can relate with a lot of these students, with where they’ve been and where they are going. We spend a lot of time together for the duration of the 10-week course, so it’s personal for me.”

With feedback from employers who hire graduates, Black, Rascon, and instructors have improved the program curriculum to better prepare students for the real-world variety of hospitality environments, from hot, stuffy, high-stress kitchens to summer camps to long-term-care facilities. Most recently, they’ve added a week of internship with cooperating food services.

“We work with a variety of employers, not just with hard skills like knife skills and food safety but also the soft skills like showing up on time, working...
with a team, and taking direction,” says Rascon. “We focus on those things to set people up for success.”

Employer feedback indicated that time management and ability to work in faster-paced environments were highly valued skills. As a result, the training program is adding more difficult preparations so that students can learn to get up to speed.

Two weeks before graduation, the students begin planning their own final test, a meal to share with the supporting friends and family attending the graduation ceremony.

Caridad seeks to maintain contact with program graduates to help them stay employed and improve their lives. Instructors help graduates update their résumés, recertify them in food safety, and host class reunions.

One of the stars of the program is Marcella Trujillo-Solis, of class 14, who graduated in 2015. Now lead cook in culinary training with Caridad, she has a lot of historical knowledge about the program, according to Black.

“One of the things that I admire about Marcella is how generous she is continued on page 77
After high school Kelly played at Pima Community College, where he was an All-Arizona Community College Athletic Conference First Team selection, and then was recruited by Syracuse University. He flirted with playing in the NFL, accepting invitations to try out with the Buffalo Bills and San Diego Chargers.

**CFSD No. 1 in State**

In the six years since Niche, the Pittsburgh-based service that ranks colleges, branched out to rank K-12 schools, CFSD has ranked as the best school district in Arizona for five of those years.

In Niche’s 2020 rankings, the district was the only one in the state to be graded A+, based on a ranking that considers academics, teachers, diversity, clubs and activities, health and safety, sports, and resources and facilities—and for high schools, college preparation.

Two other Tucson-area districts made Niche’s Arizona top 10 for 2020: Vail, which received an A and was ranked second in the state; and Tanque Verde, which received an A− and was ranked ninth. All the other top 10 districts are in the Phoenix area.

**School Board Meetings**

This month’s regular meetings of the CFSD school board are scheduled for September 10 and 24 starting at 6:30 pm in the Board Room of the Professional Learning Center at Valley View Early Learning Center, 3435 E. Sunrise Drive. Information about the school board and its meetings is posted online at cfsd16.org under the “About Us” tab.

David Hatfield is a local freelance writer. His three children graduated from CFSD, and he has served on the Catalina Foothills School Board. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

**HEART OF THE MATTER continued**

with her knowledge. Marcella learned a lot from our program, but now we are lucky enough to learn from her,” says Black.

The Culinary Training Program conducts two or three classes per year, timing graduation to Tucson’s seasons when many food-service jobs open up. The meal programs don’t stop, so there are always opportunities to volunteer. Caridad Community Kitchen is located at 845 N. Main Street. For more information, visit communityfoodbank.org/caridad.

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**FINDING CHILDREN WHO NEED SPECIAL HELP**

Ten percent of the population have some form of disability or disorder. Catalina Foothills School District is looking for any child who may have difficulties resulting from a disability that requires special education services in the school environment.

If you know of a 2 to 5 year-old child within our community who has a major difficulty with development in the areas of cognitive, communication, or social or emotional, physical, or adaptive skills, please contact Nancy Hartman at Catalina Foothills Valley View Early Learning Center at 520-299-7600 to have the child’s progress screened. Special education services are available to eligible children.

For additional information, you may call CHILD FIND at 520-676-8160 or visit the Arizona Department of Education Child Find website at https://www.azed.gov/ese/afind/