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“Where there is no vision the people will perish...” Proverbs 29:18

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Future Chefs' Summer Jobs

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By Post Staff
Part 2 of Series

David Cawthorn, 17, is thrilled that he had the opportunity to work this summer while he trained at the Future Chef Academy, earning a paycheck as he explored his lifelong passion for the art of cooking.

“Ever since I was little I’ve always wanted to cook. I learned how to be more patient, improved my skills in sanitation, built my knife skills and learned how to cook regular and healthy foods. My special dish is mushroom cream sauce over steak and potatoes,” said Cawthorn, who attends Sojourner Truth Academy, an independent study school in Oakland.

Partnered with community-based organizations Scotlan Youth and Family Center and Pivotal Point Youth Services, the Future Chef Academy was able to pay for supplies and students’ salaries with federal stimulus funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and overseen by the Oakland Workforce Investment Board (WIB).

The goal of this year’s summer jobs program is to provide work to an unprecedented number of Oakland youth – nearly 1,100, ages 14 to 24 – and also to expand the number of local non profit agencies that become involved in workforce development with young people.

Thirteen organizations were selected to be part of the summer program by the WIB, which is composed of local business, labor, education and community leaders. The Oakland Private Industry Council administers the program on behalf of the WIB. “What an amazing opportunity to provide jobs and training opportunities to the youth of Oakland,” said PIC’s program coordinator, Crystal Jackson. “We have a great community of youth, and an array of dedicated providers serving them.”

Future Chefs six-week program offered jobs and training for 10 youth this summer, utilizing a commercial kitchen and classroom at 935 Union St. in West Oakland, a site owned by the Oakland Housing Authority. The five year old program, operated by its founders Reggie and Demetra Mack, offers culinary arts and nutrition training. It is sponsored by the Eastlake YMCA. “We teach basic methods of cooking, to give each student the opportunity to create, and character development, said Reggie, who is head chef. “Everyone starts off doing sanitation. Before they can cook, they have to be able to clean the kitchen from top to bottom and be able to maintain that.”

Besides learning cooking theory and methods of frying, baking, boiling and roasting, the youth prepared and served food at a wedding reception for 200 people. Reggie, who graduated from culinary school, said he decided to start the program after doing some research on the Oakland Unified School District. “I saw a lot of teens who didn’t know anything about healthy cooking, who were gravitating toward junk foods, and were not learning about nutrition or [that] what they were eating has an effect on them.”

Reggie’s wife Demetra is executive director of the program. She is studying to become a teacher. “Every young person needs support, to find the resources they need,” she said. “In this program, they learn to easily create food that is healthy and delicious, as well as all the career and job skills they need to get along in life.”

Student Rebecca Hoover, 22, is starting at Laney College in culinary and business. “Before this program, my background was cooking things like chicken. Now, I like making chow mein,” she said.

“I learned time management and that I can cook more than I think I can. If I concentrate and go step by step, I can do anything I want to.”