



# Hope Is on the Menu

CULINARY STUDENTS AT HIBISCUS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE GET A TASTE OF FUTURE SUCCESS

BY ANN TAYLOR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MARTINE

There's nothing like the sweet smell of freshly baked cookies. On a recent Thursday afternoon, that's what fills the air in the Hibiscus Village Career Center, where a handful of teens cluster around the kitchen counter, eager to sample their latest culinary creations. Since early September they have been learning the fine points of menu planning, food handling, dietary requirements, ordering, budgeting, cooking, and presentation, thanks to Executive Chef Leanne Kelleher.

Yes, that Chef Leanne Kelleher, owner of The Tides restaurant on Cardinal Drive, who over the years has hosted wine-pairing fundraisers to support Hibiscus Children's Center, a nonprofit that provides a safe shelter for abused and abandoned young people aged 12 to 17.

Hibiscus had received a \$100,000 grant from Impact 100 to launch its Career Pathways to Independence Program, and when the culinary component was created, Kelleher didn't hesitate to spearhead CULINARY (Cooking Up Life Skills, Intellect, and Nutrition for Ambitious & Resilient Youth). She not only designed the course of study, she compiled a list of equipment needed to upgrade the kitchen in the Career Center, which also houses the graphic design component of the program.

It's here that teens learn marketable skills that will help them transition successfully into adulthood and give them a leg up when seeking employment. Talk about a win-win.

So, how did someone known for her culinary prowess go about designing a curriculum that would educate and inspire teenagers? With a smile, Kelleher says, "I read a lot of books and talked to people in the education wing at the college [IRSC]. Then I asked myself—what did I want the outcome for these kids to be?"

Culinary students are taught the importance of every aspect of the restaurant business, which gives them marketable skills in the workplace.



The Tides Executive Chef Leanne Kelleher spends one afternoon a week teaching her students how to become successful in the culinary business.



Structuring a program was one thing; being able to engage the young people another.

“When they look at you, they’re thinking, ‘What do you know about my life? You don’t care about me.’ You have to break through that. The kids need to relate to you and what they’ll be doing,” Kelleher points out.

“I let each kid choose an entrée or a dessert they want to do. We’ve had some who wanted to do cheese-

cakes, make ice cream, sushi rolls—all kinds of things. I do the research and bring in the ingredients. Once we get started, they begin to encourage each other. There’s a camaraderie that’s organic, which is an awesome thing to see.

“I tell them that education is power. Skills plus positive energy and responsibility equal success. That’s what I feel every day, and I wanted them to feel it,” Kelleher enthuses.

“I also tell them all you need to do is commit to me that you’re going to work hard. Nothing comes easy. You just can’t buy it, you have to do it, so just show up and participate.”

And those who do show up and participate in the weekly program inspire others. “Edward” (the students have selected pseudonyms for the sake of privacy) is a perfect example. Not only did he attend every session, the quick learner became a paid intern at



Each week, Kelleher asks the students to choose an entrée or dessert they would like to learn to make.

The Tides and accompanies Kelleher to the Career Center on Thursday afternoons.

“Edward translates for me; he bridges the gap between the kids in the class and me. He’s still in high school and makes good money,” she points out. “The kids see him and they think, ‘Hey, if he can make it, maybe I can too.’”

Career Pathways to Independence Program Director Frank Avilla has seen the impact a successful peer can make.

“Edward was one of the first kids we saw who had true [culinary]



## Peanut Butter Blossom Cookies

MAKES 5 DOZEN COOKIES

- 1  $\frac{3}{4}$  cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. salt
- 4 oz. (1 stick) butter, room temperature
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup smooth peanut butter (or other creamy nut butter)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup granulated sugar, plus more for rolling
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 tbsp. milk, half-and-half, oat milk, or nut milk
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- Nonstick spray or vegetable oil for cookie sheet (optional)
- 5 dozen (one 11-ounce package) Hershey’s Kisses, foil removed

Mix together flour, baking soda, and salt; set aside. Using an electric mixer, cream together butter, peanut butter,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup granulated sugar, and light brown sugar. Add egg, milk, and vanilla; beat until well blended. Gradually add flour mixture, combining thoroughly. If the dough is very soft, refrigerate for about 1 hour.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. Spray, oil or line a cookie sheet with nonstick liner and set aside. Roll dough into 1-inch balls.

Roll cookies in sugar and place on cookie sheet 2 inches apart. Bake until very light brown and puffed, 6–8 minutes. Remove sheet from oven and gently press a chocolate Kiss into center of each cookie, allowing it to crack slightly. Return to oven until light golden brown, 2–3 minutes. Remove from oven, cool completely, and store in an airtight container.

**“I’ve had a lot of support and really feel blessed. I’m never too busy to remember where I came from.”**

- CHEF LEANNE KELLEHER



potential. I remember his house parent at the time telling us he was very helpful in the kitchen and he loved to cook, so we put him in the first group and he succeeded. Chef Leanne hired him and he comes with her—he's a temporary role model."

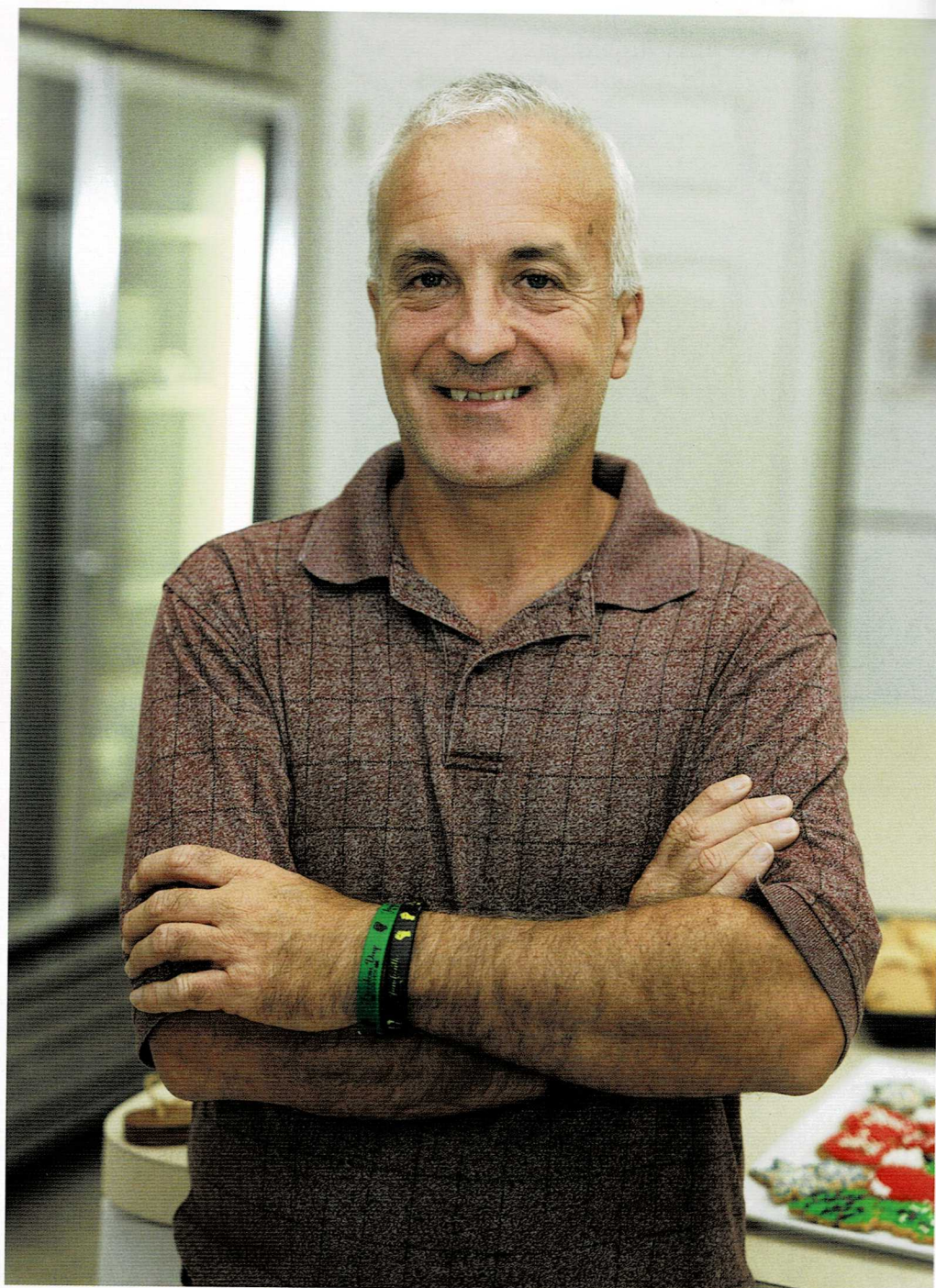
Avilla has every reason to be proud of Edward, as he's the one who identifies the teens he feels will do well in the culinary program. It's not always easy, considering what they've been through before arriving at Hibiscus Village.

"The kids come here through the Department of Children and Families. Some of them have been in the foster care system for years, so this isn't their first stop. Their lives are messy. They're in survival mode, doing the best they can.

"That's why we're fortunate to have Chef Leanne so committed to the culinary program. The goal is to give the kids she works with a sense of competence, so they can succeed in any job. We want to empower them to be as close to ready as they can be when they turn 18 and leave here."

For 15-year-old "Rayneise," being selected for the class meant an opportunity to learn new things. "I was excited and motivated knowing that most kids don't get the chance to meet or work with someone like Chef Leanne. She had us to The Tides, where we walked through the kitchen, saw all the equipment and what was being cooked for dinner. I'm so grateful for everything she does for us—she'll even take time aside and talk to you about things other than cooking."

And that begs the question: Why does a successful, award-winning chef take time out of her jam-packed schedule to work with the teens? The answer comes straight from her heart: "I just wanted to pay back, give them



Frank Avilla, Career Pathways to Independence Program director, understands the importance of giving Hibiscus Village youth a path to success through its culinary program.

the tools like discipline, responsibility, things they need to get through life. I've had a lot of support and really feel blessed. I'm never too busy to remember where I came from."

Avilla sums up the impact Kelleher and the culinary program have made, saying, "When you see a kid's light bulb go on, it's the most beautiful thing in the world."

For 17-year-old "Robb," the light bulb moment made a dramatic dif-

ference. "It's a rare experience to be doing what we're doing," he explains. "I like learning new things, and once you get a taste for it, it piques your interest and you want to know more. It's kind of like a thirst—you long for it. Being chosen to participate in the class gives me an advantage I can use to better myself as a person, and as I grow older I'll be able to pass down the things I learned to others. It gives me hope for the future." ☺