

Food Lines: Cooking class adds spice to life

BY AL CARSON, The Herald-Sun
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DURHAM -- OK, so I had to watch the British Open playoff on tape.

It was a small price to pay for a wonderful Sunday afternoon with more than 30 super folks at a cooking class.

I love cooking and sharing recipes, so when I heard volunteers were needed to teach cooking classes for Special Olympians on July 18, I did some quick mental calculations, figured the British Open would be over before the 2 p.m. class started, and agreed.

As it turned out, the golf ran over, but the cooking class was great. I was able to teach "North Carolina barbecue and the trimmings" to a class that was part of the city of Durham's Department of Parks and Recreation's Life Skills Development Program "Learning How to Cook," developed by Tiffane Land and Joel Goldfarb. I was joined by an astounding number of volunteers rounded up by this pair. Land, a master program specialist with the Durham Department of Parks and Recreation, started brainstorming activities outside of sports for Special Olympians last fall. The idea was to create an atmosphere where people with and without disabilities learn and work together.

"As you saw on Sunday, there are a number of amazing volunteers who have volunteered Sunday after Sunday to assist the participants and learn at the same time," Land said. "People often focus on what people with disabilities cannot do, but we focus on what they can do. Therefore this class was not only designed to teach cooking skills, but life skills as well."

It was early this year when Land's intuition led her to Goldfarb's Chez Bay Gourmet Cooking School.

"I just wandered into his store one day," recalled Land, who is an athlete, not a cook. "He was awesome."

Special Populations/Inclusion Division (part of Special Olympics) offers recreational and leisure programs for persons with physical and developmental disabilities. Goldfarb agreed to host a

Sunday series called S.P.I.C.E -- Special Populations Inclusion Cooking Education, with two different groups of 15 over two six-week periods. My contribution was sharing recipes for barbecue, slaw, potatoes and banana pudding. The previous week the participants learned about shish-kabobs and fruit skewers. This past week they joined a nutritionist and learned how to do healthy shopping and then prepared healthy dishes.

I was impressed by the eagerness of the students, who ranged in age from about 20 to 50, and the size of the volunteer staff, which was large enough that one-on-one attention was there for each student.

"We wanted the one-on-one ratio, but we didn't think that would be possible, so we each agreed to find four volunteers," Land said.

As it turned out, the response was overwhelming. Goldfarb called the experience "incredible fun" and said "it exceeded every expectation."

During my class, I rotated among the different groups who were teaming up to chop cabbage and potatoes and cook barbecue sauce. I had it easy, watching them work and talking about my love of cooking, especially barbecue.

Land responded to my volunteer work with an e-mail, thanking me and saying that she had high expectations for the program and was delighted at its success.

It was designed to build awareness, self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment and independence. One of the main focuses of this program is to create an atmosphere where people with and without disabilities can learn to work together.

"What was so empowering was the immediate support from the surrounding Durham community," she wrote. "Many local businesses and individuals have been more than generous with their donations."

Land went on to relate the appreciation of parents, who never realized their children could do what they are now doing, becoming more involved in the kitchen.

Some of her favorite moments in class were when "the participants tap me on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, watch me do this.' because I know they are so proud of themselves," she wrote.

The first S.P.I.C.E. session will finish on Aug. 15, with sponsors, families and other friends of participants attending a dessert tasting. As for me, I had so much fun I've volunteered to teach the second group in September.

If you wish to volunteer for this program or donate to the cause, contact Land at Durham Parks and Recreation, 306-4497.