Rescuing food and the hungry

Gettysburg College senior helped serve 1,000 pounds of food a month to local families in need.

By TIM PRUDENTE

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Gettysburg College senior Devan Grote, right, worked as an organizer for Campus Kitchen, which collects and serves food from local businesses. (Submitted photo)

First comes the noodles: flour, salt, the eggs of course. All folded together and spread long and thin on a wooden cutting board.

Then the filling: ricotta, parmesan, maybe some basil picked fresh from the herb garden out back. It’s mixed and spooned on the strips of dough, a bit of water and the press of a fork to seal, then tossed in the pot of boiling water.

Capisci? That’s how Gettysburg College senior Devan Grote learned, as a 10-year-old in grandmother's kitchen. She’d watch her aunt and mother and grandmother, all of them working over a pot of boiling ravioli on those easy Sunday afternoons.

The time in the kitchen, the conversations with family - Grote said there's no better way to talk than over food, whether preparing or eating.

"Growing up in a big Italian family," she said, "the kitchen is the focus and feeding people is the biggest thing."

Maybe that’s why when Grote was looking for a summer internship the Campus Kitchen program at Gettysburg College seemed a likely choice.

"I kind of fell into the Campus Kitchen," she said. "I didn't have a strong preference. It just seemed the perfect fit. I mean, I've grown up around food and always loved to cook."
Campus Kitchen began in November 2007 and volunteers like Grote collected unused food from local businesses including Sheetz, the college cafeteria, Kennie’s Market and the Gettysburg Hotel.

"We don’t take anything that’s been served or touched," Grote said. "This is food that would otherwise just be thrown away. It would literally go straight to the trash."

Among the foods rescued are pre-made sandwiches from Sheetz, day-old bakery items from Kennie’s, and leftovers from hotel banquets such as roast beef, stuffing and green beans.

In some months volunteers have collected more than 1,000 pounds of food, according to Grote. To date, the program has recovered more than 28,000 pounds of food and served more than 15,000 meals to local residents in need.

Earlier this month the Gettysburg Hospital announced it was joining the cause, making it the first medical facility in the nation to formally do so. Hospital officials expect as much as 500 pounds of food will be donated from the cafeteria by the end of 2010.

They even have somebody in the kitchen weighing the donations, an official said.

"While the Campus Kitchen helps families close the food gap, it also works to establish relationships that break down barriers and stereotypes. The result is the stronger, more united community," said Kim Davidson, associate director of the college’s Center for Public Service.

Although some of the food merely requires re-heating, Grote said the challenge, and the fun, lies in preparing a healthy meal out of a wide array of ingredients.

"We really have limited resources so you look on the shelves and see what's there that you can use," she added.

For example, when the college donated dozens of chicken patties, Grote added tomato sauce, a little cheese and a pinch of oregano for chicken parmesan.

Around Thanksgiving, when the program gets as many as 40 donated turkeys, Grote says they serve turkey over rice, turkey casserole, and turkey goulash.

"We also get a lot of weird vegetables, things like bok choy and patty pan (squash)," she said. "So we would literally Google what they were and how you cook them. When it doubt, we just sautéed it."

Or they threw it in a stew.

Like the one they made at the end of the summer with all the remaining fresh vegetables in the refrigerator - squash, carrots, tomatoes, greens, Japanese eggplant, some chicken broth.

Grote said it was great.

"I've learned how to cook with vegetables and to throw together a meal when you think you have nothing," she added.

Although her internship ended with the summer, Grote continues to actively participate in the program.

"It's more than just the cooking part," she said. "Growing up I always had the garden and the fresh fruits and vegetables. I never had a lack of any of that stuff, you could always go out and pick a tomato. It’s amazing the amount of people, that can’t afford to go the grocery store and can’t afford to eat healthy."

And perhaps next time, Grote’s mother and aunt and grandmother won’t object to a little bok choy with the homemade ravioli.