

Culinary students help out community



Eastside High School culinary students and a chef prepare meal kits that are being sent to Hawthorne low-income families, who use them to create healthy meals. ALACHUA COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Program provides meal kits to low-income families

John Henderson Gainesville Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

Eastside High School senior Cirius Brown said she's getting a lot more out of a culinary class this year than training to help prepare her for Johnson & Wales University, where she has been accepted into its baking and pastry program.

She's getting the satisfaction of helping low-income families in Hawthorne, who, with the help of Brown and her classmates, are getting ingredients to prepare their own healthy meals.

During a recent class period in the Institute of Culinary Arts, she was among the Eastside students who were slicing, dicing, and carefully measuring out carrots, rice, beef and other fruits and vegetables and healthy

See KITS, Page 6A

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Cirius Brown
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Kits

Continued from Page 3A

ingredients.

Students bagged them into kits with recipe cards so that the families would be able to cook their own nutritious meals.

The kits are delivered to the Hawthorne Area Resource Center, where the families who have been approved for the program pick up the meals.

"I love the program because it does help people who are less fortunate be able to afford the fresh products," she said. "Everybody wants to be healthy, but eating healthy costs so much. This has taught me a lot about the quality of food, and a lot of people may not be able to afford it."

The kits are much like those made by HelloFresh, Blue Apron and other meal kit services that have become popular

worldwide. But these kits are free.

Brown said parents often don't think about the healthiest food options for their children, but about how to buy foods that will stretch the farthest.

"And it's really hard for people who don't have the funds to meet the nutritional and healthy standards of a healthy lifestyle," she said.

She said the course also taught her about nutrition.

Once a week for six weeks, the students put together enough ingredients for families to prepare three healthy meals for four people.

Each includes a recipe card for entrees such as stir fry vegetables and beef or Spanish chicken with tomato sauce. The students are building enough kits to create more than 250 meals each week.

This is the program's second year. With additional grant funds from the Walmart Foundation and the Florida Department of Education, the students are preparing more meals than last year

and the program will continue in the fall.

The program is part of a University of Florida research program looking at the impact of meal kits on the dietary and cooking behaviors of low-income families.

Wallace Russell, the pantry coordinator for the Hawthorne Area Resource Center, said the program exposes families to new meal options.

"It gives the recipients an opportunity to have a broader experience with different types of food. It's exposing people to the type of food they might not necessarily try only because they don't know what it is or how to prepare it," he said. "Now, they have the menu items. And they might think, 'I never realized it tasted that good.'"

He also said the ingredients might not be as expensive as people think.

"They are exposing them to different and diverse types of food that may improve their diet as well as exposing them to things they don't otherwise think

they can afford."

"The families get everything they need to make the meals, and in the right amounts, said chef Pam Bedford, who runs the school's culinary program.

"We are providing three meals a week," she said. "It's all very healthy."

She said they have gotten positive feedback from the families helped by the program.

"Most of the people enjoyed (the meals) and it kind of helped to expand their palate as far as new fruits and vegetables, finding different meat alternatives, doing a vegetarian option for a meal as opposed to meat and potatoes," Bedford said.

Bedford said the class teaches her students, too.

"First and foremost, it is about community giveback," she said. "Our students got to participate in some of the branding, so they kind of had a little bit of experience building this program and having opinions about branding."