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Linda Vogler moves 
Light House homeless 
shelter into the 
restaurant business

Recipe for success
AN APPETITE FOR CHANGE

Chef Linda Vogler prepares Light House shelter trainees for their upcoming restaurant

BY SARAH HAINESWORTH

The scent of chicken baked in a thick teriyaki sauce fills Linda Vogler’s kitchen while her students stir sweet potato soup and taste Mexican cornbread. They are plating a meal for members of the Light House board. Seasonings and sauces line a spice rack along the wall.

Pinned to a bulletin board on the side of the refrigerator are measurement conversion sheets and a bit of inspiration: The only time you should ever look back is to see how far you’ve come.

It is a message that rings true for Vogler, a recovering alcoholic who once launched a Spanish-speaking culinary training program. And it is a message Vogler wants her current students — who are homeless and seeking jobs in the industry — to remember. Next year, a new restaurant will open with plans to provide at least 20 jobs for Vogler’s culinary graduates.

The Light House Bistro

In 2011, Vogler, then culinary arts coordinator at D.C. Central Kitchen in Washington D.C., was hired to implement a culinary training program at the Light House homeless shelter in Annapolis. Since then, she has worked closely with students whose pasts sometimes involved alcohol, drugs or prison. She’s trained them in a skill she believes will benefit them for the rest of their lives — cooking. The culinary field has something for everybody, she says.

“It’s the last industry you can start at the bottom and go up,” says Vogler, Light House’s executive chef and director of culinary arts training. “You can be a dishwasher and end up owning a restaurant if you work hard.”

Now Vogler and her culinary students are prepping to move to a restaurant of their own. Next year, the culinary branch of the BEST (Building Employment Success Training) program will move to the space formerly used as the Light House shelter, 206 West St, Annapolis. It is being renovated for the Light House Bistro, a 50-seat restaurant that will also serve as the home of the culinary training program. It will include four permanent housing units on the top floor.

The 2,600-square-foot eatery will specialize in comfort food. It is slated to open in the summer of 2016.
Light House executive chef Linda Vogler teaches classes to help the homeless find jobs in food service. BY LLOYD FOX
The Students

They call themselves "Dream Team 13."

Since the start of the culinary job training program, each group of students has named their class, including "Dream Team 13," the 13th culinary class at the shelter.

On a busy November day, Dream Team 13 serves the homeless population a meal of chicken teriyaki, fried rice and a tossed garden salad.

Then they plate the meal they prepared for members of the Light House board.

"Chef, taste this," culinary student Kizzy Butler says.

"It's honey butter," Vogler replies. "How bad can it be?"

Vogler and the students laugh as she brings the spoon up to her lips for a taste. She approves.

The honey butter adorns Mexican cornbread served alongside a creamy sweet potato soup, pear, goat cheese and candied walnuts. This is atop a bed of arugula, trout en papillote, lemoned brown and wild rice with sun-dried tomatoes and an apple Snickers tart for dessert.

Vogler admires the spread.

"Another 13 winner," she says. "Good job everybody!"

'Serving more than an appetite'

Vogler grew up in Charlotte, N.C., where the tradition of preparing food had been pivotal.

"Food heals everything," she says. "In my community, growing up Irish Catholic, you took food when somebody was born or died. It's how you show you love people."

Vogler obtained a culinary arts certification from Harris-Georgetown Technical College and was later certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation.

She worked as an executive chef at a hospital in North Carolina for 10 years before founding the Community Culinary School of Charlotte (CCSC). There she created a Spanish-speaking culinary training program for adults who were facing issues, such as homelessness or alcoholism, that could hinder their employment options.

"When I first started, people were reluctant," she says, adding that they didn't understand why she wanted to work with the drug/alcohol users or homeless population.

"The point is, if they don't have the skills, they have to go back to the only way they know how to survive. I've worked with people who have been incarcerated. My main thing is that you want to cook. I can deal with everything else."

Vogler says she loves working with the population at the Light House and shares her story of overcoming alcoholism with her students so they can see that their dreams can be attained.

Chef Ron Ahlert served as the culinary instructor at CCSC and calls Vogler "one of my favorite people on this planet."

"She's truly inspiring — her desire to see others go from one economic level to another. Yes, we taught cooking but we really taught legacy re-creation. We truly were serving more than an appetite."
“Food heals everything... In my community, growing up Irish Catholic, you took food when somebody was born or died. It's how you show you love people.”

— LINDA VOGLER,
Light House Executive Chef

Ahler, now executive director, says Vogler's work has made a lasting impact because some of the students she taught and mentored visit CCSC in search of other students to hire.

“I cherished every moment working side by side with her,” he says.

“What a relief to know that there are people out in the world like Linda Vogler who are ready to assist folks with a hand up.”

The Legacy
The culinary training program at the Light House is part of a 16-week curriculum that teaches students everything from clarifying butter to the correct way to slice a chicken breast.

Linda Crockett, a 47-year-old Pasadena resident, was one of the program's first students.

A 2012 graduate of the second culinary class, Crockett had been a Target employee until her fiance was killed and her mother died shortly afterward. She went into a depression that caused her to lose her job and apartment. She heard about the Light House shelter and enrolled in the BEST program.

After completing the program, she had health issues that kept her from working, so she mentored other culinary students.

Then in 2013, Crockett obtained a GED diploma and began working in catering for the Light House. Now, she is the catering manager and thanks Vogler for her success.

"From day one, she took me under her wing,” Crockett says.

“She took on a mother role more than an instructor. I learned how to motivate people, how to mentor them, I've taught them different things that I've learned from her.”

Verket Randall, a 38-year-old Annapolis resident and recovering alcoholic, was among the Dream Team 13 students to graduate from the program this month.

“It has changed my life,” she says.

“Light House gave me a chance to get myself back in the workforce and Chef Linda has been a very big inspiration in my life.”

For Vogler, her driving force has been pursuing her passion.

“At the end of the day, I have so much fun,” she says.

“I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

12 Cooking up a career
Linda Vogler guides the Light House's culinary students into the food business
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