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EDITOR'S NOTE This newspaper went to press before results were final. Go online for complete coverage, and check next week's newspaper for follow-up analysis.

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Top chefs

Seguin preps people with disabilities for jobs in the food service industry

Page 7

Jeffrey DiFiglio (left) rolls out dough while making Bark Bones, dog biscuits sold at the gift store at Seguin Service Center. Watching is life skills mentor Bernadette Jackson (center) and Stephanie Grippando. Staff photo by Paul Iwanaga

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CICERO

Seguin kitchen program more than just a flash in the pan

By Laura Bollin
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At first glance, the Portillo's Learning Kitchen at the Seguin Services Carr Center looks like any other commercial kitchen.

It has ample counter space, new appliances and large trays of fresh- baked cookies. It's the chefs that make this kitchen really stand out.

At any given time, five or six of Seguin's participants — adults with physical or intellectual disabilities — are working in the kitchen under the direction of a life skills mentor.

The Seguin organization has programs and classes for adults and children with physical and mental disabilities.

Terry Porter, the curriculum adviser for Seguin, said the kitchen, located in Cicero, gives participants life skills and the chance at a job. The kitchen was created in 2008 through a $50,000 donation from Dick Portillo, of restaurant fame.

"Before we had this kitchen, we were holding cooking classes in small group rooms," Porter said. "This kitchen teaches people how to cook in something other than a microwave."

Participants in the learning kitchen program work roughly once or twice a week on a rotating basis, and any adult in the Seguin program can sign up. Students come from different areas of the western suburbs, including Brookfield, Berwyn, Riverside and La Grange.

Most join the program in hopes of finding a job in the food service industry. For instance, former kitchen students have gone on to work as dishwashers in local restaurants.

On a typical day, three-to-five students typically work in the kitchen, which is open six days a week.

The students make lunch for various clients — other staff members at Seguin — and are paid for their work.

Through the program, participants learn how to follow a recipe, how to measure, bake and follow sanitation and cleanliness rules.

"They make cookies for bake sales, Bark Bones — which are dog biscuits that are sold in our gardens and gifts shop — and do some catering for events," Porter said.

Porter said the program can be an avenue for a job for some participants. One former Seguin chef is now a dishwasher at a local Old Country Buffet, and another works for the town of Cicero.

"They learn how to pay attention to a schedule," Porter said.

Stephanie Grippando, 47, of Berwyn, is hoping that her work in the kitchen leads to a job.

"We learn how to bake and make sandwiches for the staff for lunch," Grippando said. "I want to work because I want to earn money."

Grippando said she's also happy about the friends she's made while working in the kitchen.

"I like hanging out with these people, because I don't get to see them very often," Grippando said.

The kitchen program is open to everyone at Seguin, and the daily participants operate on a rotating basis.

Porter said that all of the countertops in the 435 square-foot kitchen are wheelchair accessible.

"They were made so people in wheelchairs could scoot up to the counter and still be able to work," Porter said.

That fact has made it easier for people such as Dagma Gillison, 27, of Brookfield, to take part in the program. Gillison has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, but said she likes working at the kitchen.

"We learn cooking and baking," Gillison said. "Today, I'm making oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. We learn how to mix the cookies.

"It's fun and happy working here," she added. "It's a joyful place."

To Donate

WHAT Purchasing Bark Bones, dog biscuits baked by Portillo's Learning Kitchen participants
WHEN Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
WHERE Seguin Gardens and Gifts, 5621 W. 31st St., Cicero
COST $3 per dozen
WHY All proceeds benefit the kitchen program
FOR MORE INFO Call (708) 222-2772





Above, Stephanie Grippando learns kitchen skills at Seguin Service Center in Cicero. She's delighted after her mentor praised her after the first time she successfully used a rolling pin for the first time. They were rolling out dough to make Bark Bones, dog biscuits that are sold in the facility gift store.

Left, Stephanie Grippando (right) washes and rinses while Jeffrey DiFiglio dries tools used to make dog biscuits.
Staff photos by Paul Iwanaga

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