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# Eatery serves up hot jobs, new life

Zoe Sandvig SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Most days around noon at 500 Third St. in the District, the food at the New Course restaurant is served by a work force of homeless and formerly incarcerated people.

Over the past 17 years, New Course, which claims to make the "best turkey sandwich in the city," has helped almost 400 chronically unemployed D.C. residents get back on their feet and enter the food service industry, in style.

Many of their graduates work as chefs across the city in venues, ranging from the Marriott to IHOP.

Pamela Bowen, 50, hopes to be one of those graduates. Recently she spent one day looking over the chef's shoulder as he tossed broccoli, tomatoes, garlic, bow-tie pasta and Alfredo sauce in a skillet.

"This is my first day working on pasta," she explained. She had already mastered chicken salad, omelets and banana bread. This time last year, she was living in an abandoned apartment.

The eatery, founded by the D.C. nonprofit Community Family Life Services, was originally known as "Third and Eats" - a pun on its location at Third and E streets Northwest at Judiciary Square. It became New Course three years ago when the catering side of the business, which operates across the street at the U.S. Tax Court building, started to expand. Plus, the owners wanted a name that was easier to understand over the phone.

Ten trainees in white smocks and blue chef hats lined the back of the counter, joking with one other. A few were carving roast beef, others were making sandwiches. Each was somewhere along a 16-week journey to learn the basics of culinary arts and, hopefully, earn their food service sanitation certificate.

During their four months of training, they earn a stipend of \$70 - mostly to cover travel expenses - as they alternate between working at the deli and the catering service. They are expected to show up on time - at 5:30 a.m. - wear a complete uniform, take hygiene seriously and provide cheery customer service.

"In this business, the good thing about it is that you don't necessarily have

to have a college degree or even a high school degree, for that matter," said Director Will Doscher. "What you do need ... is have a good attitude, show up every day on time, be willing to work hard, and you'll do OK."

Miss Bowen said she used to sleep all day during her seven years on the street. Now she gets up at 4:15 a.m.

"I look forward to getting up in the morning and coming, because when I get back, I can tell the people that 'I made this today,' or 'I tried this,'" she said, her eyes glowing.

After serving a month in jail for trespassing in a deserted apartment building - she likes to refer to it as her "abandonium" - Miss Bowen sought drug treatment and moved into a women's transitional home, where she learned about New Course from another resident. In September, she showed up for orientation and found herself learning how to carve turkeys, arrange fruit trays and prepare egg salad.

"I always knew I liked to cook, I just needed to know how to cook," she said.

More than 3.5 million Americans face some form of homelessness every year, according to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

In San Francisco, a program called CHEFS (Conquering Homelessness through Employment in Food Service) has prepared more than 600 formerly homeless men and women for culinary jobs. In New York City, a homeless outreach called Project Renewal claims to have placed more than 85 percent of its graduates in jobs since the program's inception in 1995. Similar programs have popped up in Baltimore, North and South Florida and Southern California.

New Course was placing four out of five of its graduates in culinary jobs until the economic slump, Mr. Doscher said.

"It's been more difficult placing people in jobs, in particular, as you can imagine, in this environment, with so many people unemployed, and people who are less-qualified for positions," he said.

On any given day, the restaurant serves about 500 customers, mostly government employees who work at Judiciary Square. Aside from catering items, the most expensive item on the menu - a plate of pasta - is no more than \$6.

Miss Bowen isn't sure where she'll go after she leaves 500 Third St., but she is confident there will be a place. She recently prepared her first Thanksgiving dinner, and is looking forward to earning her certificate and

opening her own restaurant someday.

"It feels good," she said. "I can't even describe it. You know, my family is so proud of me.

"I just walk around with my shoulders up high. It's a big difference."