

# Cooking for Kids

At Chef School, children learn the dying art of preparing a meal

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With childhood obesity and diabetes on the rise in this fast-food nation, the counterinsurgency on the local front rests squarely on the shoulders of Marjorie LaFont and her army of nutritionists and teachers.

With 36 years on the job, LaFont has never faced more formidable odds. Her program is the last systematic effort to target Peoria's 15,000 children and teach them how to cook. She reaches about 600 each year with Chef School and another 5,000 with 90 4-H clubs that meet during the school year.

"No one else in Peoria is teaching children to cook. There used to be home economics, but no Peoria public schools still teach it. A tremendous loss! Families are way too busy these days to teach children how to cook," said LaFont, nutrition and wellness educator with the University of Illinois Extension Service in Peoria.

"It's easier for families to grab carryout, eat junk food or grab a snack and run. The food industry caters to what people will buy, and the industry makes it too easy for people not to cook."

The proof is in the eating

On a recent weekday morning, LaFont surveyed students and instructors in the old home economics classroom at Manual High School, which she is using this summer for her 18th year of 4-H Chef School.

Children range in age from 7 to 15. On this morning, children are making breakfast of biscuits and gravy - specifically, made-from-scratch biscuits and pork sausage gravy.

Tresean Mabry, 12, wasn't too sure about how the biscuits and gravy would turn out. By contrast, he was sure he liked the French toast the class made earlier in the week. He liked it so much, he made it for five people at home the other morning.

"It's my favorite. Used to be pancakes, but now it's French toast," the Lincoln School eighth-grader said.

Not involved in the bustling pace of breakfast preparations, Rayven Anderson, 7, was calmly mixing pumpkin-peanut butter dip for apples that would be part of the day's lunch menu.

Working with her was Samantha Rennack, a Bradley University junior studying dietetics and minoring in psychology. Rennack hopes to work in the field of eating disorders.

"Everyone is so eager to learn and so excited about learning," she said. "Everyone is doing a fabulous job."

Once breakfast was prepared, the children sat down to eat. Rennack presided over one breakfast table, ladling sausage gravy over biscuits and passing the plates around the table. Each plate also had a slice of watermelon.

Rennack gently admonished one child who started eating instantly, reminding him to wait until everyone at the table had a plate.

"The children are learning a lot that I had just taken for granted - everything from basic table etiquette to following a simple recipe versus eating a bag of Chee-tos for breakfast," she said.

Children have asked where they can buy measuring cups and spoons, giving instructors yet another clue that cooking is not a process going on at home.

"Some children don't even know how to open a can," LaFont said.

"I see a huge difference in the skills of children. It used to be that in Afro-American families, the grandmother taught the children to cook. Now the grandmother is working. Today, most kids have never had greens, a dish that used to be an Afro-American staple.

"Families are no longer eating together. That whole process of manners and pleasant conversation is lost."

Bradley University associate professor Jacqueline Hogan said, "High fat, high salt, junk food diets are easier to measure and have clearer effects on health, especially for children. The social effects are harder to measure."

In addition to the Manual High School location, Chef School is also held at University United Methodist Church, 2818 N. University St. Enrollment is full, but LaFont expects to offer the program again next summer.

"I could easily run four series of this program and fill enrollment with no advertising," she said.

Children attend one-week sessions, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., from early June through mid-August. They prepare and eat breakfast and lunch each day.

For more information on 4-H Chef School or to purchase the 2008 Chef School cookbook, which comes in level one and level two, contact LaFont at 685-3140, Ext. 16. The cookbooks are \$5 each.