

Teens Cook For Homeless

By John Nickerson

STAMFORD -- Twenty teens from Westhill and Stamford high schools showed off their culinary chops Saturday during a "Top Chef" style cook-off competition in the South End where they used donated food to prepare breakfast and lunch for dozens of homeless men and women.



The students, who volunteer for the community service organizer buildOn, a non-profit that runs programs at each of the high schools and others in Norwalk and Bridgeport, served 30 to 40 residents at Inspirica's South End campus at 8 Woodland Place.

The event was part of buildOn's "Top Chef Cooking Competition," which also brought high school students from Norwalk and Bridgeport to other homeless shelters and community centers in their cities.

Ten girls from Westhill High School got an 8 a.m. start at Inspirica where they set about preparing a breakfast of bacon, cinnamon rolls, pancakes, eggs and parfaits for about 30 men and women. The men and women, who are not ordinarily served breakfast or lunch at the campus, then graded the girls on how they liked the meal.

Later this week buildOn program coordinator Rohanna Wagener will tally those responses with the ones from the boys' lunch of chicken, cornbread and spinach and find out which meal the residents liked more.

The Westhill and Stamford high students collected the food used at Saturday's breakfast and lunch during a food drive at A&P on High Ridge Road on Friday.

Even though she is only 15, Kelly Finn, who was cooking rashers of bacon for the breakfast, said she came out to give back to the community.

"I feel my community has provided me so much over the past couple of year, the least I could do is give back," said Finn, who with about 15 other students is scheduled go to Nicaragua this summer with buildOn to build houses for the less fortunate.

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Finn, who has been involved with the buildOn group at Westhill for the past two years said, "It's funny. I have always been involved in volunteer work. I'm just taking it a step further."

While she was putting cinnamon buns on a buttered pan in the Inspirica kitchen, [Nancy Juarez](#), 15, said her 20-year-old sister Shelby encouraged her to get involved with a group and "put herself out there."

"By me coming here, I gain experience. I get drive. They give me so much more than what I can give to them," Juarez said.

[Jamila Marrero](#), 15, who was layering yoghurt, granola and fruit in clear plastic cups while making the breakfast parfaits said, "I love it. I'm having a lot of fun cooking. It feels so good to help somebody."

With the smell of bacon and pancakes wafting into the Inspirica auditorium, [Robin L. Moore](#), 59, said she was very appreciative of the efforts the kids were putting into her breakfast.

"I think it is very, very nice and I am thankful of them to take the time and come. I appreciate it more than anything in the world," said Moore, who has been an Inspirica resident for three years.

Another resident [Brenda Wright](#), 55, said, "I think it is good that young kids want to do this more than to see their friends or go to the mall. It is great they want to do this."

Rohanna Wagener, who finds volunteer activities at Westhill and Stamford high schools for buildOn said, "My students love coming to Inspirica, they really do. When we ask students, across the board what is there favorite project, they will say food pantry or cooking at the shelter. I think it is because it gives them a chance to meet the people and work with a group they wouldn't ordinarily interact with. They just really enjoy that direct connection with their community members."

Inspirica's spokesperson [Kelly Leather](#) said she and the residents really enjoy having the buildOn kids at the campus.

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"They bring energy in with them. They always provide a bright experience for our residents. I will always get a call after buildOn has been here on the weekend from someone asking, 'can we have that group back?'" Leather said. "The kids aren't standing behind a brick wall dishing out soup from a ladle. That is commonly the thought when people think soup kitchen. We encourage our volunteers to sit at the tables and enjoy the meals they have cooked with our clients and it provides that interaction. I think for the kids it give them an opportunity to break that stereotype they may have in their minds of who might be homeless."

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