

Stone Soup Project teaches workforce, life skills

Madison County Eagle (VA) - November 5, 2015

- Author/Byline: Becca Pizmoht
- Section: Lifestyles
- Readability: >12 grade level (Lexile: 1390)

There is an old adage: if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach a man how to fish you will feed him for life. The Stone Soup Project is just that. This food service training program is designed to help low income individuals get skills that can aid their entry into the workforce and improve their quality of life by teaching valuable life skills.

The Stone Soup Project comes to Madison County with a six-week course starting Nov. 9. The Madison course is the second of two pilot programs with the first having been completed Oct. 27 in Culpeper with nine graduates.

The six-week course is run by Virginia Cooperative Extension and the Virginia Food Enterprise Centers with the assistance of Rappahannock Goodwill Industries and Rural Madison. Funding for the project is through a grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. The Madison course will be held at the Madison Extension office in the War Memorial building and is open to local residents 18 and up. The sessions, which are free to attend, will be held 6-8 p.m. Monday evenings with child care available. Participants are expected to attend all six sessions.

Graduates of the program will receive three certificates—the National Restaurant Association ServSafe Food Handler Certificate of Completion, the Cooperative Extension Customer Service certificate and the Stone Soup Job Skills Training certificate. The Stone Soup Project has partnered with Rappahannock Goodwill Industries to provide graduates with paid internships. Through a grant from the Piedmont Workforce Network and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Goodwill Industries will place the graduates in food service internships and pay the graduates' salaries for six weeks. At the end of the six-week trial, employers will have the option to hire the graduate.

Marty Bywaters-Baldwin of Rappahannock Goodwill Industries is pleased with the results of the Stone Soup Project so far.

"We're happy to partner with Cooperative Extension," he said. "Five graduates of the Culpeper program are taking advantage of the internship program. We're hoping to have similar results in Madison."

Bywaters-Baldwin believes the Stone Soup Project is filling the needs of the workforce and employers.

"Employers want skilled workers, even at entry-level positions employees have to have basic skills and that's where a program like this comes in," he said. "Once the workers have these skills they can get more training with an internship."

Ren LeVally, vice president of Rural Madison and a professionally trained executive chef, will be teaching culinary skills to the Madison students.

"At first, I was skeptical that folks would even be interested in such a course," he said. "Now, [after completing the Culpeper program] I'm blown away by the students' enthusiasm and dedication for the course."

LeVally sees a strong need for all types of workforce development and is hopeful that the program will become a permanent fixture.

"Organizations like [Madison Emergency Services Association] (MESA) provide our people with help in times of urgent need, but it's programs like this that teach people the skills to take care of themselves," he said. "It's critically important that we give people a leg up so that they can succeed."

As well as kitchen skills, students are introduced to basic nutrition, food safety, shopping skills and personal hygiene. Instructor Becky Sheffield said she "tries to encourage healthier eating choices."

"Many of the students come in and have no idea how to prepare something from scratch," she said.

LeVally agreed.

"Not only do we teach skills to do, we encourage them to make healthier eating choices," he said. "We need to show that preparing good healthy food is more affordable and better for you than something from a drive-through window."

"Ultimately we are trying to give the participants marketable skills to get them a job within the food service industry," Sheffield added. "They also benefit from learning to prepare low-cost, fresh, nutritional foods. It improves their health and helps them save money."

Each week students will learn core kitchen skills. Students will receive some of the tools needed to practice their culinary skills at home

such as knives, thermometers, carving boards and cookbooks. Students are expected to bring their tools to class.

“Some of what we teach is responsibility,” Sheffield said. “It’s a necessary job skill.”

The collaborating groups are hoping to get funding to continue the project and make it a permanent part of the workforce development training at the George Washington Carver Agriculture Center in Culpeper.

“There is a real need for this type of training,” LeVally said. “Restaurants and food service in hospitals and schools are looking for people with these skills.”

Sheffield echoed that sentiment.

“Food service is a big industry and it provides many good entry level jobs,” she said. “This is a way to provide employers with people to fill those positions.”

• *Dateline: Charlottesville, VA*

• *Record: f11fb22576721613da722bce38f6037a9716cc8*

• *Copyright: © Copyright 2015, Madison County Eagle, Madison, VA*