CHEFs for Schools, Inc. Cooks Up Volunteers for CookShop

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by Alexandra Talbot

As the founder of CHEFs for Schools, Inc. – a tax-exempt nonprofit organization that strives to alleviate food inequality in underserved communities by training and placing student volunteers in worthwhile service opportunities - I am proud to support CookShop, the core nutrition education program of the Food Bank For New York City.

Since CHEFs' inception in the spring of 2007, we have made tremendous strides toward our goals of improving food security, alleviating childhood obesity, and achieving food justice by supporting equal access to affordable and nutritious groceries. Our partnership with the Food Bank has been a major factor in reaching these goals.

I learned about CookShop while working as an intern at the Food Bank in the fall of 2008. CookShop is a federally-funded nutrition education program that helps children, teens and adults develop nutrition knowledge and cooking skills through hands on workshops. The program currently reaches approximately 30,000 New Yorkers, including students in more than 1,300 public elementary school classes and after-school programs.

I quickly realized the benefits of placing volunteers in CookShop Classroom for Elementary School, the program's component for students in pre-K through second grade. Volunteers enjoy building relationships with elementary school students in underserved neighborhoods, and seeing the impact of their work as the children develop new skills and learn to make healthy food choices. By assisting the teachers, volunteers make CookShop even easier to implement, helping to increase the number of participating classrooms.

CHEFs helps recruit CookShop volunteers through a unique cultivation program in which university chapters offer educational, free and fun events that address bring students together around a shared interest in food issues. For example, the CHEFs for Schools' Chapter at NYU offers free monthly cooking classes that unite and educate prospective and current volunteers around delicious, nutritious meals, while the CUNY Hunter Chapter will launch a food justice speaker series in the fall.

CHEFs aim is to recruit the most capable and motivated volunteers possible. The CookShop program requires no prior experience in public schools or food preparation, welcoming a wide variety of volunteers ranging from college students to working professionals. CookShop provides all volunteers with free training to improve their understanding of food preparation skills with elementary school children and demonstrate how to support a classroom during exploratory and cooking lessons.

I hope that you will join us in our efforts. Please take a moment to review the Food Bank's various volunteer opportunities, including CookShop, and learn more about CHEFs's efforts to impact food justice through volunteerism.