

FOODSERVICE LEADER OF THE YEAR

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for two private and 12 District of Columbia public schools. The Kitchen also added food packaging as a way to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to local corner stores in D.C.'s food deserts.

With those initiatives, the opportunity to create more jobs and more job training grew, too. Through its Culinary Job Training (CJT) program, the Kitchen holds four 14-week training sessions per year, graduating between 100 and 110 people annually. Trainees come from all walks of life. About 60 percent have been incarcerated. Seventy percent have experienced substance abuse. "They are women and men who have suffered abuse or trauma, people who have been chronically homeless and unemployed for much of their lives," says Curtin. "All have experienced significant barriers to meaningful employment."

More than pots and pans

"Only about 50 percent of what we do is about pots, pans, stoves, and knives," says Curtin. The rest of what DCCCK teaches is life skills, which will help people not only get a job but keep it. The National Restaurant Association's Educational Foundation has developed a list of 11 competencies that entry-level employees must learn to succeed on the job. DC Central Kitchen is part of a national pilot program, with eight other organizations, to test whether it works. "We teach life empowerment skills, such as showing up on time, playing nicely in the sandbox, and following directions."

The application process is rigorous. DCCCK recruits actively in prisons and via the criminal justice system. It doesn't work, though, until a candidate is ready, says Curtin. "It doesn't make any difference unless the candidates want to make changes in their lives. They have to have reached a point of 'this is it. I need something else or what's next is not good.'" After a first

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Breaking the Cycle : A Conversation with DCCCK's Dawain Arrington

Dawain Arrington is a production manager at DC Central Kitchen's main kitchen facility, but he didn't start out that way. Not even close. His dad was a dealer and his mom an addict who would leave him and his two little brothers alone for days at a time to fend for themselves.

The first time he was arrested, he was caught stealing food for himself and his siblings. He was 11. He was involved on and off with gangs, violence, and incarceration for the next 20 years.

"I did 16 years of prison from the time I was 12 to 32 years old. The first five years was pretty much like the streets – it was basically gladiator school. But when I turned 25, I realized I had a light at the end of the tunnel. I was going to be released in eight some-odd years, and what am I gonna do? I'm thinking, 'Man, I'm going to be sleeping on my aunt's couch.' And I knew 'the game' was something I never wanted to go back to. I despised it. I just lost interest in anything in the game. I changed in prison. The last eight years was all just focusing, concentrating, programming, educating myself and setting myself up for my next move when I came home."

A second chance

After being released from the Lorton prison in 2005, Arrington tried to get a job. "I tried a couple of apprenticeship programs, but a lot of places wouldn't give me this chance because I'd never had a job before. I'd been incarcerated the majority of my life. I just kept having doors slammed in my face."

Finally, an advisor in a half-way house mentioned DC Central Kitchen. Arrington was not very optimistic at the start. "I thought it was going to be a dead end like the rest. I never thought about cooking food or anything. That wasn't on my mind, (but) it's one of those things where your career chooses you, you don't choose it. I figured I'd just try. And it worked out. They (DCCCK) saw something in me that I didn't see... a leadership quality that I always knew I had. I just led folks the wrong way (on the streets). So, I figured well, I can take this talent to this level here... and it seemed to work out."

Arrington's first position at DCCCK was in catering. Eventually, he moved to the main kitchen to be



around more volunteers and to help incoming student trainees. "I wanted to help the students that came behind (me). I want to assist them along the way."

He also wants to influence others who are walking the path he once followed. "I want to catch these guys that are coming home from prison, or drug addiction, or whatever. Those ones that think they are slicker and can keep doing it again and getting away with it. Or, doing short term and coming back home and doing the same thing. I tell them, 'The deck is stacked against us. We've been doing this for the majority of our lives — the end game being the same — incarceration, or some type of homelessness, or even death. It's time to change, man.' So that's one of my biggest goals, why I'm here."

For the last four years,

Arrington has been a supervisor in the organization's main kitchen, where he oversees the work of 18 staff and 35 volunteers. In a small space, organized like a symphony, they prepare thousands of meals three times a day, every day. He laughs, "It is madness at times, dealing with multiple personalities, but I like the fact that when I see different faces come in, it almost feels like I'm in a new job setting. I'm talking to different people, new faces, new cultures... like a group came here from Ireland. And just to hear the way they talk, their culture, how the homeless situation is in Ireland. Now we're Facebook buddies and things like that. Just meeting different cultures, different folks, understanding this whole thing. It's like every day is a new day. That's what makes it easier to go through. I'm not bored with the same set up every day."

Family pride

"My family are proud, they are really proud," Arrington says, with a smile on his face. "Actually, my aunt told me before that she always knew I was going to do something. I always was in some type of leadership role, even if it was on the streets. So, she always saw that in me. She said, 'Man, if you could put that toward something!' So just to see me being released and actually get a job. The family was like, 'He got a job? At 32?' It was the first job I ever had in my life. They're definitely very proud. They talk about it a lot."

As to what's next?

Dawain Arrington — now with a job and a future — speaks with hope in his voice and commitment in his words. "I have a seven-year-old daughter. She'll be eight in a few weeks. Her mom and I are first-time parents. And we both recognize the street. We are both on a clear path now. So we know what the obstacles are out there for our daughter. We're going to show her that so she will understand it — so we can break the cycle. We are going to change the cycle that's been going on in our family — starting with her."

— Lisa Keathley