

Food for Thought helps families get the most out of food donations

By Mack Burke Transcript Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, October 2, 2015 7:15 am

Norman's food pantries combat hunger by providing food to hungry families. But what do those families do with the food when they bring it home?

Founded in 2010, Food for Thought is an organization whose mission is to help people maximize those resources through cooking classes and demonstrations.

"We do a great job in this town and in this state, but not everybody is familiar with a lot of these items," Food for Thought director Matt Joplin said. "They might not know how to cook some of these items period. So, a lot of those donations sadly will go to waste. We come in to get people comfortable and excited about the food they're being given."

Food for Thought empowers people with the knowledge and skills to prepare food. Even if someone's cooking skills are nonexistent, Food for Thought can help them start from scratch.

"That's what we strive for and that's what we offer," Joplin said. "We teach in a way that's comfortable and accessible to everybody. Whether you're a really well-trained cook, there's a good chance you're going to learn something and if you don't know anything at all ... If you've never used a can opener, you're going to leave more comfortable, confident and capable than you were in the kitchen."

The United Way of Norman contributes funds to two Food for Thought programs, Pantry Partners and Kitchen Confidence. The Pantry Partners program is aimed at working directly with Norman's food pantries. On pick-up days, volunteer chefs set up cooking demonstrations based on the food items being distributed.

The Kitchen Confidence program works with needy individuals to increase their familiarity with the cooking process.

"That allows us to work with all kinds of people," Joplin said. "Sometimes it's kids, or emancipated



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Left to right: Karen Sonntag, Matt Joplin and Amy Radford of Food for Thought give a demonstration on food preparation at Planet Reeves summer Camp.

teenagers who might not otherwise be getting this instruction, who might not ever have learned the basics of cooking simple things.”

Food for Thought doesn't hold stand-alone public demonstrations, yet, preferring to partner with organizations that already bring in their target audience, but anybody is welcome to attend the sessions. Food for Thought works with organizations like Bridges, Dimensions Academy, the Baby Steps program, the Salvation Army, Little Axe Community Food Pantry, Boy Scout troops and church groups.

“Many of these people have so many built in excuses to quit trying,” Joplin said. “We're trying to step in and help them eliminate those excuses and eliminate those reasons to quit.”

Instructional chefs like Amy Radford and Sunny Hill donate their time and efforts to the program.

“Food for Thought is all the people who have cooking passion and also don't have any of the ego that comes along with a lot of jerks who think they know how to cook,” Joplin said. “(Being a chef) is a very ego-driven profession. That's a really unfortunate aspect that I think prevents people from even getting into the kitchen.”

Those volunteer efforts, combined with the support of the United Way of Norman help Food for Thought continue to expand its mission.

“Being a United Way member opens up so many doors for us,” Joplin said. “People just have to see that ‘UW’ next to our name on the letterhead and that already gives us so much credibility. It would've taken years and years to build that kind of trust in the community, but because the United Way has looked at us, vetted us and worked with us, it opens up so many doors.”

For more information on how to make an impact on Food for Thought's United Way partner programs, visit unitedwaynorman.org.