

Cooking lessons for blind more than learning a skill

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Jamey Wagner, front, and Anna Bradburn are among six blind participants in the Canadian National Institute of the Blind cooking with the chef program.

Photograph by: Ed Kaiser , The Journal

Lincoln Nanaquawetung is careful as he chops and dices peppers, tomatoes and a red onion.

"Just getting my fingers too close to the knife is a challenge when chopping my vegetables," Nanaquawetung said.

Across from him is his cooking partner, Bruce Pylatuk, who adds herbs, meat, seafood, rice and liquids to a pot. The two blind men are making paella, under the guidance of Fantasyland Hotel Chef Shane Chartrand.

Nanaquawetung, Pylatuk and four other legally blind cooking enthusiasts made the dish at Chapman's Produce on Thursday.

"The ability to make a distinct dish as opposed to Kraft Dinner is enjoyable," Nanaquawetung said. "I'd never make this at home."

In 2001, the now 36-year old Nanaquawetung lost his sight as a result of optic nerve disease. He once worked on the rigs and enjoyed working with his hands. He said the toughest thing about being blind is that he's no longer as independent.

Nanaquawetung is now studying for his diploma in social work at Norquest College and has his sights set on a bachelor of social worker degree from Edmonton's University of Calgary campus.

He said the CNIB has helped him tremendously.

Ellie Shuster, director of regional communications for the CNIB, said the event was a way for blind people to learn to do make something unique in the kitchen.

"They all had hands-on lessons from CNIB independent living skills specialists beforehand, but this event is not about how to cook. It's about how to make something that's really special," Shuster said.

The event almost didn't happen. CNIB specialist Kate Fullerton said the event wasn't solidly booked until three weeks ago, after the idea had been passed on to a few different chefs.

"We spent many months trying to book this event and we thought it wasn't going to happen until Chef Shane came on board," Fullerton said.

The question of where to host the class was settled when Chartrand came on board. Jack Lygas, owner of Chapman's Produce, agreed to host the class at his business.

"I've known Shane for years and when he called me up, afraid other places didn't have enough room to host the event, I said it would be fun to hold it here," Lygas said.

For Chartrand, it was a different experience to be giving culinary instructions to blind people. He has done previous events with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, but this was unique.

Chartrand told the participants they were to be sous chefs for the day and he would treat them like any of his sous chefs. He decided on paella because he wanted them to make a dish that a chef would make.

"I picked it because it's tasty and they could easily create it at their home," he said.

"I wanted an easy dish with some challenges, but one that wasn't too technical."

Jamey Wagner was just excited to make something different. Two years ago, Wagner was in a car crash and ended up in a coma. When he woke up he couldn't see. Before the accident Wagner loved to barbecue and now, despite his disability, he still enjoys it.

"I do all my barbecuing now on my George Foreman grill," he said.

The 24-year-old said he was grateful for the chance to get insight into professional cooking.

"There's nothing to compare it with," he said of the paella.

"It's the most sophisticated dish I have ever made."

Despite the intricacy of the dish, Chartrand was surprised at how well the participants handled themselves in the kitchen.

Shuster said the CNIB's mandate is to ensure legally blind people are able to participate in daily activities, and events like this are a way for them to become more independent and gain confidence in life.

"There's really nothing they can't do," she said. "They just do it differently."

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