

# nurture through the need

Culinarians and students bring their hospitality heartbeat to community service. // Jody Shee



no one is more uniquely equipped than chefs to bridge the gap between necessity and nourishment when charitable assistance is called for. From fundraising dinners to urgent disaster relief efforts, it's the chef's high ground

to step into the community spotlight to make a qualified difference.

"We're in the hospitality industry, after all," says **ACF Chef Pam Bedford, CCE**, director of the Institute of Culinary Arts at Eastside High School, Gainesville, Florida. She also is the ACF 2021 Educator of the Year. "It's important to give back. You get what you give, and it's important to teach students."

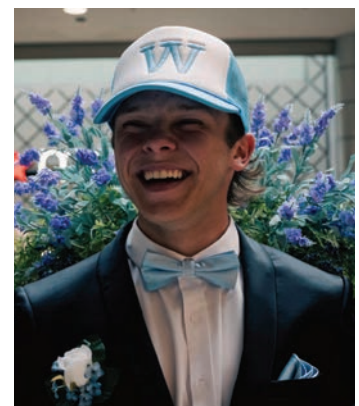
## students and community service

Chef Bedford involves students in the school's community service projects, two of which benefit the Rotary Club of Gainesville Foundation, Inc. The

foundation, which helps to fund the school's culinary arts program, sponsors two annual community fundraising events: the spring Wild Game Feast and the fall Seafood Spectacular.

One of Chef Bedford's spring 2023 graduates, **Dallas Webb**, participated in both events, which feature food booths for the hundreds of attendees. "For the Wild Game Feast, we students cook for the vegetarian booth," he says. "Those who help the institute are the ones we serve. We get to meet those people. It's rewarding to give back to people who give to you."

Chef Bedford conducts an in-house student competition to determine the dishes that the school will serve at the rotary club events. "A few Rotarians come to the school to judge the competition, and the winners' dishes are then featured in the booth," Chef Bedford says.



Above: ACF Chef Pam Bedford, CCE, director of the Institute of Culinary Arts at Eastside High School, Gainesville, Florida, and one of her graduates, Dallas Webb (right).



Teenagers can be self-absorbed, Chef Bedford says. Through serving other individuals, they see a bigger purpose. “When the students receive positive feedback at the events, they feel good about what they’ve done. I tell them, ‘If you keep doing those things, then you’ll keep getting those good feelings.’”

Besides the positive vibes he receives from helping with the charity events, Webb has benefited another way. “I’ve learned that networking is a huge thing. You can get connections that help you down the line,” he says.

While serving at the Wild Game Feast, Webb met the owner of Hill’s BBQ & Catering, Gainesville. “He saw how I was working, and he needed help on a catering job,” Webb says. “I showed up, and now I’ve worked there

“It’s important to give back. You get what you give, and it’s important to teach students.”

- Chef Pam Bedford, CCE

for one and a half years.” While still in high school, Webb became accustomed to driving the catering truck and trailer, setting up, cooking food offsite, tearing down and cleaning up. He’s also involved in handling inventory and doing food pickups. The experience has helped him see a future of owning his own culinary-related business, whether that be a restaurant, food truck or catering company.

It’s important for students to learn through community service that they are not the only ones in this world, Chef Bedford says. “We’re here to serve our fellow man. It feels good to be good to people.”

## foodservice outlets as community hubs

“Restaurants are the soul of the community, and chefs are the heartbeat,” says **ACF Chef Jeffrey Schlissel**, chef/owner of private chef service Bacon Cartel, Tampa, Florida, specializing in Floribbean cuisine. He also is co-host of the “Walk and Talk” podcast. “Chefs who are not doing community service are not doing the right thing. Food is the center of civilization.”

He participates in fundraising dinners benefiting the Children’s Home Society of Florida, as well as dinners to raise funds for the Quantum House, which is similar to the Ronald McDonald House. He also has helped with The Lord’s Place, West Palm Beach, Florida, working with the homeless to teach them restaurant industry job skills. Additionally, he supports Florida farmers who need help working through some of their emotionally challenging business-related crises.

Chef Schlissel believes that when students and his cooks see his involvement in these activities, he demonstrates the human side to culinary.



“When there’s destruction, mayhem and chaos, the one constant is food. When the world is crumbling around them, what better way is there to make people feel human than to give them a nice meal?” he asks.

Chef Schlissel says he couldn’t do some of the community functions he does without help from culinary students and sees himself as a mentor for the next generation. “At the end of the day, chefs are a lighthouse making a difference, and one day, that kid or line cook will make a difference because you made a difference,” he says.

Students who participate in helping someone who is down and out may never know the impact they had, Chef Schlissel says. “However, they will come away with a different perspective on what down-and-out is.”

## teamwork matters

Healthy teamwork makes the culinary kitchen, as well as community service outreach, run smoothly. What does it take to gel a team that works well together?

When students need a partner to complete a class lab or project, Chef



Bedford has them draw names from a hat. “They get mad because they want to work with their best friend,” she says. “I say, ‘Welcome to real life. You won’t always like your co-workers. You’ll have to figure it out.’ They end up realizing it wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to them.”

Inside a working kitchen, Chef Schlissel sometimes asks cooks to develop menu ideas for their “own restaurant.” Then he asks the rest of the kitchen staff to judge it. This helps the idea-generating cook to work on not being offended with others’ reactions. It teaches the “judges” to be honest and heartfelt. It all helps develop communication among the whole team.

Chef Schlissel also fosters great team relationships by taking his crew away from the kitchen to a farm to learn where the food comes from and hear the story of the farmer. Or Chef Schlissel takes them to another restaurant to see how it does its operations, he says. Back in his own kitchen, Chef Schlissel asks for feedback on how the other restaurant did. “This helps to build your team up to be better,” he says, adding, “It’s amazing the buy-in you receive when you have your team participating instead of acting as the boss who simply tells them what to do.”

## helping during disasters

Whenever a community is struck with such natural disasters as hurricanes, floods or tornados, no one is more qualified as first responders than chefs, says **ACF Chef Amy Sins**, chef/owner of Langlois Culinary Crossroads, a New Orleans culinary event business for private gatherings, and founder of the nonprofit **Fill the Needs**, which coordinates rapid deployment and resource facilitation within the first two weeks after a disaster.



When a flood devastated South Louisiana in 2016, Chef Sins was determined to donate 200 servings of corn soup from her restaurant freezer. But the need was far larger. Over the next 19 days, she pulled together a network of chefs, restaurant owners, nonprofit faith-based organizations and everyday people for more comprehensive coverage. She ended up facilitating the distribution of more than 100,000 meals, 10,000 diapers and several 18-wheelers of supplies and water.

After responding similarly following Hurricane Laura, which hit Louisiana in August 2020, and Hurricane Ida in August 2021, Chef Sins founded the nonprofit Fill the Needs. She assesses, evaluates and implements a coordinated effort to provide services and resources for the first two weeks after a disaster. “Chefs have skills that go far beyond the kitchen. We understand a brigade system and how to manage people. We make confident, split-second decisions in the moment. We know how to live in chaos. It’s what we do every day,” she says.

“It is one thing to train for disaster relief, but it’s another thing to live in that

Opposite: ACF Chef Jeffrey Schlissel, chef/owner of the private chef service Bacon Cartel, Tampa, Florida; Above: Volunteers rescue restaurant supplies from a power outage during Hurricane Ida to feed the community.



“It is one thing to train for disaster relief, but it’s another thing to live in that constant adrenaline mode that chefs live in. It’s the mode that can get things done during a disaster.”

- Chef Amy Sins

constant adrenaline mode that chefs live in. It’s the mode that can get things done during a disaster,” Chef Sins says. “For example, you have a huge 3,000-people event coming to a hotel. All of a sudden, the fish truck dies on the interstate. Now you can’t get fish. Now you improvise. It’s the same thing in a disaster-relief situation. You come up

with solutions and improvise.”

She knows from experience that ACF Chefs do whatever they can to help others. Communities were stranded in the Carolinas after Hurricane Florence hit in September 2018. “All of a sudden, entire communities were without food and water and people couldn’t drive outside their communities,” Chef Sins says. New Orleans chefs cooked, vacuum-sealed and froze meals that were then airlifted to an ACF Chef who was able to keep them cold until it was time to reheat and serve to the community. For Hurricane Ida, another ACF Chef asked how he could help and ended up calling a hardware store three hours from New Orleans, gave his credit card number and ordered 10 propane tanks to use for cooking and serving meals at ground zero.

Chef Sins advises culinary students to start young helping out in their communities. “Your local community kitchen and food bank always need helping hands,” she says. Besides helping with needs, community involvement helps you relate to your community, no matter what segment of the industry you plan to go into. “You are being exposed to ideas and other leaders who can make you stronger and better.”