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Wednesday, March 18, 2009

Recipe for transformation

Bakery serves up fresh start

Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

More than baked goods are being created inside a building at Gratiot and McClellan -- a program is under way that participants credit with transforming their lives and helping move them from substance abuse to culinary arts.

The Capuchin Province of St. Joseph brothers -- which has been a fixture on Detroit's east side since 1883 offering everything from substance abuse counseling, free meals and organic gardening -- will open On the Rise Bakery to the public April 26.

A staff of five men and two supervisors make the cookies and breads in the program, which helps those recently released from prison or recovering from substance abuse get their lives on track. The men sell their baked items on Sundays at houses of worship across Metro Detroit.

Advertisement "I had no idea I would love baking," Wallace Gilbert said last week while rolling dough for a coffee cake. "Now I am thinking about furthering my career in culinary arts."


Gilbert, 31, came to the program six weeks ago while struggling with substance abuse issues. He said the baking has helped him to keep a clear mind.

"It has everything I need," he said. "It makes you able to become a more productive member of society."

The brothers spent more than \$200,000 renovating the space, which they lease from the Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance. The funds came from grants, donations and sales of baked goods.

The men used to bake in a house on the city's east side, but moved to the new building in November.

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Edward Collins, 60, of Detroit credits the program with turning around his life.

"I came to get something to eat and a bus pass, and I have been baking ever since," Collins said of joining the baking program more than two years ago.

"To me it is like a miracle. I wasn't at the bottom of the barrel; I was underneath the barrel."

The men stay in a house owned by the Capuchins, and their bills are covered through the sale of baked goods.

The Capuchins will open a 1,110-square-foot store at the front of the 2,300-square-foot bakery. All profits are pumped back into the bakery.

"The men are who make it happen," Brother Ray Stadmeyer said.

"They are willing to work long hours. The program gives them hope. That is the payoff."

Program participants will live in the home and work at the bakery for two years. They are encouraged to save the minimum wage they earn, Stadmeyer said.

They must work 25 hours a week and attend 15 hours in classes or meetings. The bakers crank out 300 football-sized loaves of bread, 150 sweet-smelling pies, 500 cookies that look like softballs squished flat, 40 jumbo coffee cakes filled with real fruit and 100 each of cinnamon and onion rolls weekly.

Collins, who helps to run the bakery, was incarcerated for more than 30 years for various crimes before joining the Capuchins' program.

"I was able to get a new lease on life," he said.

"It has taught me to live within my means, which is something I could not do."

Monsignor Michael Bugarin of St. Joan of Arc Church in St. Clair Shores said program participants sell their goodies at his church three or four times a

year.

"Every time they are here, it is a sellout event," he said. "The bakery will be a big blessing for them."

One reason for the sellouts is the price of the baked goods. Cookies are \$1, bread costs \$3 per loaf, and cakes and pies are \$6.

The cost is surprising based on how large the items are, the bakers said. But bakery co-manager John Karnicki, 44, said the large size of the baked goods can't be helped.

"When you have men baking, everything is going to be big," said a laughing Karnicki, who has since graduated from the program "Our pinch and dash is a handful of this or that."

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