

Juggling life's choices from the kitchen

Written by Emily Blodgett

Wednesday, 05 February 2014 15:55



When most of us shudder at the thought of feeding 100 people, Lachelle Cunningham's wheels start turning.

She's thinking, "What's fresh and available? What ethnic cuisine should I explore? Which dish should I prepare that's tried and true and where can I be completely creative?"

The entrepreneur chef, owner of Chelles' Kitchen LLC, has rented space at Kitchen in the Market at Midtown Global Market, 920 E. Lake St., Minneapolis. Despite juggling a staggering number of balls, including two young children, culinary school, teaching after school classes at various Twin Cities high and junior high school and regular catering jobs, she is focused, energized and with the assistance of Neighborhood Development Center's (NDC) training program, ready to take on that meal of 100 – or ten times that.

Cunningham has been preparing for all the aspects of life as a professional chef since she was a girl. And it wasn't just the cooking and baking with her mom (the "traditionalist") or her father (the "spice king"), her stepmother (the "experimenter") or even the after-school food creations with her brother. Cunningham's work history as an executive assistant in budgeting and financial reporting, event planning, customer relations and human resources has prepared her

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for the business side of the famously challenging field of catering and restaurant work. Now she believes she can focus more on her passion – making food people love to eat.

"I've finally found my passion, and it's not working behind a desk," said Cunningham. "I am inspired by and love food. And when people would tell me 'this is fabulous,' it's just reinforcement that I'm doing what I should be doing."

Though she's full-on with catering, her wheels spin again with future possibilities of opening a restaurant, starting an urban garden and teaching cooking classes for adults and children.

"I'm still in culinary school. I need to learn to take baby steps," laughed Cunningham.

It was her father who first directed her toward the class at Northside Economic Opportunity Network (NEON) in north Minneapolis in the spring of 2012. The chef wasn't a stranger to NDC. Her aunt was the late NDC director of training, Bonita Martin. And though Cunningham had years of practical work experience and a proven ability in her field, she called her time in NDC's Plan It! Entrepreneur Training program, "the most useful thing I've ever done professionally." Cunningham said the Plan It! book is a tool she still references when thinking about her future or when tweaking her business plan.

Cunningham refers to NEON trainer and NDC loan officer, Phillip Porter, as an advisor who offers assistance without micromanaging.

"He's a guide who helped bring elements of business management together and aligned it for me so it made sense for what I want to do," said the chef. "The more I learned from him the more I realized that running a business wasn't a foreign language at all; it's the language I've been learning to speak all along."

The NDC training also provided her with strong relationships with her peers who bounced business plans off each other, provided support, referrals and even services. Her classmate, Frank Brown, designed her logo.

"As you can tell I have a lot of plans," said Cunningham. "There's a lot more I still want to do and I know I haven't yet hit the height I can with NDC."

Learn more:

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