

The Bistro that Takes Food Stamps

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In One City Café's casually elegant dining room, you can enjoy such delicacies as fusille with Portobello mushrooms or eggplant Parmesan topped with smoked mozzarella. You can relax on a velvet banquette and sip on a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice while taking in the colorful downtown crowd. Then, when the check is at last placed next to your coffee cup, you can pay with a credit card – or with food stamps.

Since its founding in December 1994, New York City's only not-for-profit restaurant has served as both a cozy neighborhood bistro and an inviting alternative to soup kitchens and food pantries. Dining beside cash-paying customers, those using food stamps pay half price for delicious but modestly priced Southern, Latin American, and Caribbean comfort foods (the most expensive entrée, glazed baby back ribs, lists for \$9.50, or \$4.75 in food stamps). "Because it's not a charity, there's no stigma attached," says founder Ellyn Rosenthal. "Part of our mission was to be a mainstream setting where all people can eat together. Customers get into conversations and it just never comes up. It's beautiful the way people mix."

An anthropologist by training, Rosenthal (the executive director of Food & Hunger Hotline, which runs the café) says she dreamed up the ideas after working for an emergency food-service program in Washington Heights, a predominantly Dominican neighborhood of New York City. People there told her repeatedly of their desire to retain their dignity, to be able to pay for meals like everyone else, to not have to wait in endless lines, to not feel different. "Many times homeless families don't like taking their children to soup kitchens to see a meal handed to them," she says. To develop a better model, Rosenthal led 200 hours of interviews with the homeless. Another inspiration behind One City: community restaurants in Europe where poor students and the working poor dine well.

In addition to providing a dining experience with dignity, One City also serves up job skills and hope to the shelter residents and the formerly homeless people who comprise 40 percent of the restaurant staff – from sous chefs to hostesses to assistant managers. The intensive nine-month program provides life skills, job training, and apprenticeships with food-service-industry mentors. Of the first graduating class of eight, most have found full-time private food-service-industry mentors. Of the first graduating class of eight, most have found full-time private food service jobs, and one has become an advocate for the Food & Hunger Hotline. Twenty new trainees are currently enrolled.

Antionette Crawford is one such success story. Before joining One City, Crawford (pictured on previous page, bottom right) had spent some time in a homeless shelter and was struggling to support herself and her son on the low wages she earned working in fast food. Now, at 29, she is the production manager of a pastry kitchen and earns over

\$20,000 a year. She credits One City with “getting me connected with a job that’s not just your typical \$5-an-hour position. Now I have a future with a company.”

Since One City opened, Rosenthal’s office has been flooded with calls from people wanting to start similar projects in their own communities across the country. While she’s honest about the challenges she has faced with the project, she’s also clear about the payoff. “The rewards come when you see everyone eating together.”