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North Beach Elementary students' class project: dinner for 140

BY TANIA VALDEMORO

A delicious aroma wafted through the kitchen of North Beach Elementary School. In one corner, students spooned picadillo, a spicy meat filling with olives and tomato sauce, into fried plantain cups. In another corner, students stirred lemons in a vat of water and maple syrup.

Twenty-seven fifth-graders put the final touches Wednesday on a dinner party for 140 under the watchful eyes of chefs Ray Newlands and Michael Schwartz.

It was the culmination of The Dinner Party Project. Miami Beach resident Cindy Hill worked with Spoons Across America, a New York-based nonprofit, to bring the seven-week cooking and nutrition program to the school. Since 2001, the nonprofit has held more than 50 dinner parties nationwide with more than 5,000 children and parents participating.

Hill is a former caterer studying holistic nutrition. She shares the nonprofit's mission: to teach children the connection between food and the Earth -- and encourage them to share meals with their families.

"I didn't want to feed people for the sake of feeding people," Hill said, explaining her recent career switch. "The students are making the connection between what they are preparing and what they are eating."

She raised \$6,000 to launch the pilot program. Hill tapped Newlands, who has a catering company in Miami and Schwartz, who owns Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, a foodie mecca in Miami's Design District.

Every Wednesday afternoon, fifth-graders learned a new lesson: how to plan a menu, write invitations, set the table, serve food and chop fruits and vegetables. They made omelets with peppers and mushrooms, baked chicken with black bean and mango salsa, and prepared pineapple upside-down cake.

"I'm always up for a better solution to eating healthier," said Schwartz, who has two kids in public schools and doesn't always approve of the menu. "The food is horrible and it's got to change."

Principal Alice Quarles said The Dinner Project reinforces the school's mission to teach kids healthy habits, noting childhood obesity and diabetes are on the rise.

She hopes the school can raise enough money for a second round of classes.

"This was funded through donations," Quarles said. "We'll see if we can get another group going."

Kristy Woolliscroft has already noticed the difference in her son, Max Eisenberg.

"We cook together and I'm making really good food," she said. "Everything has to be fresh now."

Eisenberg, 10, said he enjoys his new hobby. "You can be as creative as you want," he said.

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