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Cooking up Hope

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By Audrey Sellers

Taste Buds Kitchen (TBK) in Southlake has uncovered the recipe for compassion. By day, the local studio is bustling with creative kids, and by night, the studio is filled with adults honing their culinary chops. But on special occasions, you'll find young chefs discovering the kitchen is more than a place to let the flour fly; it's a destination that nourishes the soul.

Since the Southlake TBK opened its doors two years ago, owner Eden Bullock has partnered with HopeKids, a national nonprofit that provides events and activities for children with life-threatening medical conditions.

Bridget Asheim, executive director for the North Texas chapter of HopeKids, which serves nearly 700 families around the Metroplex, says the organization aims to provide a bright spot in kids' lives. "HopeKids gives children something to look forward to," she says. "Without having an event or activity to anticipate, it would only be pokes, needles and appointments."

While HopeKids hosts a variety of weekly events for children—anything from movie nights to outings at Dallas Mavericks games—TBK events are particularly special, notes Asheim.

"Without TBK, our families wouldn't be able to experience things like decorating cookies or making pasta and pizza," she says. "Kids can look around and see other kids just like them—maybe they have a feeding tube or they've lost their hair. TBK provides so much more than food."

Last fall, TBK and HopeKids teamed up to give three kid culinarians something to get excited about—they turned the kids into star chefs for a night.

BLENDING FUN AND FUNDRAISING

Bullock first discovered HopeKids through a close friend whose children have significant medical conditions. While TBK locations around the country work with the nonprofit Cookies for Kids Cancer (the Southlake kitchen raised nearly \$3,000 last year), HopeKids was a way for Bullock to give back locally. The partnership has become the Southlake kitchen's biggest philanthropy.



“I immediately thought HopeKids was such a wonderful way to impact families whose lives aren’t always the easiest,” Bullock says. “A lot of times, these kids have to miss out on basic things. Cooking is empowering to them.”

TBK hosts small, private events for HopeKids, but Bullock and Asheim wanted to concoct something different; they wanted to give kids the ultimate culinary experience. So they decided to put budding chefs in the spotlight at HopeKids’ annual fundraising gala—let the children design the menu, prepare the food and serve their culinary masterpieces to guests. Not only would it allow the nonprofit’s donors and sponsors to connect with kids personally, it would also give children an incredible experience.

Kids with a passion for cooking were encouraged to apply to be chefs at HopeKids’ Roaring Twenties-themed gala last November. Children answered a series of interview questions and submitted their best recipes, and their parents visited with Bullock and Asheim to share a little more about their children and how he or she could contribute.

“We wanted the menu to be of the highest quality and the best recipes,” Bullock notes, “but also recipes that kids could execute. Preparing a meal is hard work—especially for a large crowd.”

Three aspiring chefs, all with their own culinary visions, were selected to be HopeKids’ chefs for the gala: 11-year-old Austin, 11-year-old Harmony and 13-year-old Connor. “The chefs had very different ideas,” Bullock says, “but they were all proud to share.”

Austin, one of the featured chefs, is happiest when he’s cooking. He has a heart condition, and while his mom Jennifer says he can’t hold pots and pans on his own and he isn’t tall enough to reach the stove, he loves to prepare his own foodie creations—especially when it involves his big sister and an Easy Bake oven.

“He likes to cook anything. It doesn’t mean he’ll eat it, though,” says Jennifer, with a smile.

MAKING MEMORIES

The kid-inspired menu featured savory bites including meatballs, hand-rolled sausage pastries and every Texan’s favorite: chips and queso. The chefs-in-training worked with TBK pros to execute the menu for approximately 120 guests. The evening kicked off with a VIP reception, and then the kids served their specially prepared food to attendees.

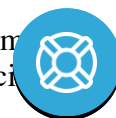
Bullock says the excitement was off the charts. “These kids have never been in a situation like this. With all the medical care they receive, they’re usually in the spotlight not for a fun reason,” she says. “They were thrilled with the opportunity, and they did it all with such passion and enthusiasm.”

The kitchen may have been the focal point for the kids, but it certainly wasn’t the high point of the evening. Hosted at the sprawling Pack Automotive Museum in Farmers Branch, the gala provided a unique opportunity for kids to explore nearly 300 vehicles—from classic antiques to hot rods with race and movie histories. Owned by Sam Pack, a Dallas-area car dealer and antique car collector, the museum boasts one of the largest antique automobile collections in the Southwest.

“Sam Pack and his wife have the museum for their own personal enjoyment, but he works with select groups and individuals,” Bullock explains. “We feel privileged that we got to use his museum for the gala.”


The chefs enjoyed examining the cars up close and even shimmied behind the wheel in some of them. For Austin, it was the experience of a lifetime. “He loved seeing all the cars,” his mom Jennifer says. “That was one of the most exciting parts of the evening for him.”

Bullock is already looking forward to partnering with HopeKids for this year’s gala and bringing alumni in the event. “Donating an experience is so meaningful to us,” she says. “We love to give back, especially to kids in the community.”



For Asheim, it's fulfilling to see HopeKids' mission brought to life through young chefs, an open kitchen and a love for cooking. "I can't say enough about TBK. It's not just a job to them, it's their passion," she says. "It's the same for HopeKids. How great it is to be part of something that is our calling and our passion."

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