

## **Delonis Center to graduate 1st culinary class**

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Of all the criticisms about what today we know as the Robert J. Delonis Center before and during its construction, one of the more frustrating was the complaint about the facility's cost.

At \$6.6 million, it wasn't cheap.

But the four-story building on West Huron Street was never simply a dorm with 50 beds.

It was, and today is, home to programs and services meant to move the homeless toward independence.

One of those programs, based in the center's Community Kitchen, holds its first graduation next week.

In many ways, it's a modest step.

Nine young people have participated in the Food Gatherers Community Kitchen Job Training Program, a six-week course covering basic culinary arts, food safety and sanitation.

And though the 16- to 19-year-olds have had a chance to work on job skills and spend time at People's Food Co-op, Arbor Brewing, the community college culinary arts program, Monahan's Seafood Market and several Zingeman's businesses, there's no guarantee they'll land work - or necessarily earn the food-safety certification that can make securing work much easier.

"We're having a graduation," says Eileen Spring, executive director of Food Gatherers. "I hope we'll have nine graduates."

On the other hand, this promises to be the first time that some of the participants have completed any training or educational program.

That, says Spring, is why "graduation" is a big deal.

The students?

They come to the program through Ozone House, the local nonprofit that provides emergency and transitional shelter for homeless teens, and from Arbor Heights, a state residential facility run by the bureau of juvenile justice. "They're homeless or at risk of being homeless," says Spring.

The goal, plainly, is to change that.

And while the Food Gatherers Community Kitchen Job Training Program is very much what planners imagined when they designed the big commercial kitchen at the Delonis Center, it's not the only use for the facility.

During the school year, special-needs students from public schools get food preparation experience through the Chain of Plenty program, previously based at the old Ann Arbor Y. On a daily basis, the kitchen provides hot meals - more than 150,000 plates so far.

The kitchen also allows Food Gatherers food rescue operation to accept and process foods it might have previously had to turn away.

Opened in late 2003, the Delonis Center and the services provided there by the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County, Food Gatherers and others continue to evolve. There are certainly goals not yet met.

But the critics who took the cost of the facility, divided by 50 beds and declared the project an extravagance were never right.

There's space that allows social workers, counselors and health-care professionals to work with clients. There's the kitchen. And now there's a group of young adults, who - for one reason or another - have had rough starts, with some new life skills and hopefully some appreciation of how many people are pulling for them to succeed.

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