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A Recipe for Success: Prison Culinary Training Programs Change Lives and Provide a Second Chance

BY WE ARE CHEFS | SEPTEMBER 7, 2018

by [Kenya McCullum](#)



Vito Scarola admits that his life was going nowhere — except to prison.

“When I got there, I had no job experience, no life skills, nothing,” he explained. “I was just an untrained convict — that’s the only way I can really put it. I had nothing going for me at all.”

But while he was serving his sentence for burglary charges that stemmed from his drug abuse, Scarola found his direction and purpose when he got the opportunity to receive culinary training provided by [Bridges of America](#), a re-entry program for offenders that builds a bridge between incarceration and a successful release through job training and therapeutic services.

“I was just super excited to be given a chance to learn something useful — most people don’t get that opportunity. That was a big deal for me,” Scarola says. “I actually worked

seven days a week, pretty much all day in the kitchen and just tried to learn anything and everything I could.”

And learn he did. Since his release in 2011, Scarola has gone on to work his way up in his culinary career from a dishwasher to a managerial position. He is also married with two children, and is currently earning his second college degree. To this day, he credits all of his professional, personal, and educational successes to the training he received from Culinary Instructor and Chef Mike Schnitzer at the [Orlando Bridge](#).



“When you get released from prison in Florida, you basically get a \$50 bus ticket and a kick in the butt. What are you going to do if you get released from prison and you have no skills? You basically go back to your old bad habits and bad ways,” says Schnitzer. “Our program is designed for clients that have no job skills at all. We give them job skills so that when they’re eligible for work release, they can get meaningful employment.”

Bridges accomplishes this by providing 1,000 hours of culinary training over the course of six months. During that time, students learn a variety of skills — such as ordering

and receiving food, kitchen sanitation, hot and cold meal preparation, knife skills and food storage — which culminate in an [ACF certification](#) at the end of the program. In addition, the program also requires treatment for drug and alcohol addiction, and life skills classes. After successful completion of the requirements, clients are eligible for work release so they can apply the skills they learned to a real-world kitchen during the day and go back to the facility at night. In addition to building work experience, the clients also earn money that provides a financial cushion for them to use when they go back home.

“When clients get released, they have thousands of dollars in their account,” Schnitzer says. “They don’t get just a kick in the butt and get shoved out the door. They leave with a skill and this money in their account — and they already have a job.”





Ryan Stanley CC, CEPC during his CEPC exam.

Similarly, people who have completed the culinary program at Reality House have also been able to get a job and turn their lives around, as well as receive the addiction treatment they need to live a clean and sober lifestyle.

“One of our clients stated that when he first went to prison, he had never accomplished anything. He went to prison for drug charges and he said he had never accomplished anything, he was never anybody,” said Kirk Kief, Executive Chef and Culinary Instructor at Reality House. “When he left, he said that his self-confidence was 180 degrees from what it was when he went into prison because he not only went into the culinary program, but he also earned his Certified Culinarian and went for a Certified Pastry Culinarian. He’s now the general manager of a very successful local franchise here in town.”

Similar to Bridges of America, [Reality House](#) provides an intensive, eight month culinary program that allows clients to receive a certification after completing classes designed to prepare them to work in a kitchen. To help reinforce this training, when clients are eligible for work release, they have the opportunity to get a job with the organization’s numerous local partners.





Reality House's the final three clients to earn ACF certification — all of whom passed two certification exams. (left to right) Vance Hennion CC, CPC, Jason Brugos CC, CPC, and William Sands CC, CPC

“We have partnered with over 250 different organizations in the community. We have a strong footprint in our community in regards to our reputation and we use it to our advantage to get the guys hired at different organizations,” says Andrew Williams, Reality House’s Senior Director of Residential Services. “The reason we have such a good rapport with the restaurants here in town is because guys from our facility that are going out and applying for jobs have gone through at least eight to nine months of not only culinary training, but also substance abuse training and classes on how to act in public and make good decisions. It isn’t like the restaurants are hiring people straight out of prison with no background. They’ve gotten this education and they’re a different type of person than what they would be coming straight out of prison.”

Bridges of America - Inmate 9



Re-Entry Programs Face an Uncertain Future

Despite the successes of Bridges of America and Reality House, the Florida Department of Corrections has made a decision that could negatively impact not only the lives of inmates struggling with addiction issues, but the community as a whole. In June, budgetary cuts were made that discontinued contracts with private inmate transition and addiction treatment programs and led to hundreds of layoffs around the state. As a result, the substance abuse treatment and culinary training that inmates were able to receive before their release are no longer available.

“The Department of Corrections chose to eliminate the programs that had the most impact for the clientele, which in my opinion, was not a wise decision,” Williams says. “We are the reason why the Department of Corrections’ numbers were going down in terms of their recidivism rate.”

Even though the current state of these programs is discouraging, there is still hope. When Florida elects a new governor in November, it is expected to result in the appointment of a new Secretary for the Department of Corrections — and possibly a

reinstatement of the contracts that allowed Reality House and Bridges of America to provide culinary training and drug treatment services. In the meantime, these organizations are working with lobbyists to demonstrate the importance of the services they provide and the impact they have on the entire state.

“You don’t want people leaving prison the same way they came in. You want to give these inmates the opportunity to be productive citizens,” says Williams. “That’s what our culinary program was doing. We were putting our guys in a position to be successful in terms of getting jobs—and not just a flipping hamburger job; these guys were getting career jobs and were giving back in regards to hiring our clientele.”

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Kirk Kief

September 20, 2018 at 7:18 pm

This was a nice article, it is a shame that Reality House’s track record was not mentioned. We run a 7% recidivism rate which is the lowest of all the re-entry programs in the state, by far. This means for every 100 clients that