

A Recipe for Success

How your United Way contributions are changing lives.

Jose Gonzalez has been an optimist most of his life, believing everything happens for a reason and if we remain positive and are patient, things will generally work out. A few years ago Jose's optimistic outlook on life was challenged, but with the help of a couple of United Way-funded programs, his positive perspective has been restored, along with his faith and respect in people who care about others in our community.

Jose grew up in California and spent 20 years in the mortgage banking industry. He earned a good salary with great benefits. Life was sweet, but the hassle of fighting freeway traffic every day and dealing with skyrocketing California housing prices made Jose think there must be a better place to live. When he came here to help his company open an office in Corporate Woods, Jose felt like he'd found a hidden jewel. It was a community with big city amenities but a small town atmosphere. People were friendly; everything was green; it felt comfortable. So Jose decided to make Kansas City his new home.

Everything was going fine until about five years ago when Jose left his job at the mortgage company in a desire to simplify his life. Jose went to work for a local school district but eventually decided that wasn't the answer either. Suddenly Jose had no income, no health insurance and, like a lot of other people, he couldn't find a job. Jose briefly moved back to California but quickly decided he missed living in Kansas City so he returned. Jose was unemployed for more than a year. During that time, he began having health problems. He had previously been diagnosed with high blood pressure and the stress of being unable to find work only made it worse. He was also battling depression, but with no health insurance he couldn't afford to go to a doctor. Jose wasn't sure what to do. A friend suggested he go to the Kansas City Free Health Clinic which has a program for the uninsured, which is funded by United Way. There, Jose received free medication for his high blood pressure, treatment for another recurring medical condition and counseling for his depression.

His counselor recognized that Jose's depression was tied to his inability to find a job and he encouraged Jose to think outside the box in finding something he really liked to do. Jose mentioned that he enjoyed cooking and his friends told him he was pretty good at it, but Jose had no idea how to turn his "interest" into a career. His counselor did. He told Jose about a United Way-funded culinary arts program at Episcopal Community Services designed to give unemployed men and women the skills they need to work in the food and restaurant industry.

Jose was accepted into the Culinary Cornerstones program where he spent four months learning how to cook and prepare food. The program provided hands-on training where students learned the basics of cooking and catering. Through the program, Jose learned that cooking is an art, whether you're preparing a meal for one person or for 300. He discovered that being a chef is more than mixing in the right herbs and spices; it involves budgeting, timing and presentation as well. Jose excelled in the culinary program and was offered the opportunity to become a catering intern when he graduated. In addition to teaching students how to cook, instructors also taught them interview techniques and how to go about finding jobs in the food and hospitality industry.

Jose put the lessons he learned at Culinary Cornerstones to good use. About the time he was finishing his internship, Michael Smith was opening a new restaurant, called Extra Virgin, in the Crossroads District of Kansas City. He was looking for a cook to work the day shift. Jose's can-do attitude and a positive recommendation from the staff at Culinary Cornerstones opened the door for Jose. Michael Smith personally interviewed him the day Extra Virgin opened, hiring him on the spot. Jose has been working there ever since. He loves his job and working for Michael Smith. Jose says, "He's honest and treats people with respect. Michael knew I didn't have a lot of restaurant experience but said he likes helping people who are trying to better themselves. He gave me an opportunity to do something I love, which I appreciate very much."

Jose has been working at Extra Virgin for 2½ years now, and says he’s learned a lot. Michael Smith has taught him that cooking in a fine dining restaurant is about more than making great-tasting food; it’s about pleasing people and helping them relax.

Jose knows he wouldn’t be where he is today without the kindness of others. He’s been back to speak to students at the Culinary Cornerstones program, a number of times. He’s also helped them prepare for their final exams which involve planning and preparing a meal for 70 people. Jose says, “It’s my way of saying thank you. Culinary Cornerstones not only helped me, but they taught me how to help myself. It’s an example of that Midwestern attitude of caring about others that helped draw me here 20 years ago. I love living in Kansas City and I’m proud to call it my home.”



Chef Anthon Herring (right) says the art of cooking involves more than mixing herbs and spices. It also includes timing, budgeting and presentation. Chef Herring has been an instructor in the Culinary Cornerstones program for more than two years. It is one of more than a dozen job readiness and job training programs funded by United Way.



Milton Jenkins (left) learned the importance of carefully measuring ingredients as part of Culinary Cornerstones’ 12-week training program. After graduating last year, Jenkins began working for Episcopal Community Services’ food catering program.