

Facilitator — April/May 2013



Change La

A Dream Realized*Sherleen Mahoney*

At-risk students in low-income communities face some daunting obstacles, including poverty, family instability and a high prevalence of factors that prevent them from succeeding in school. These students require extra help, attention and services to steer them toward academic success.

In Sanford, Fla., where the median annual household income is \$40,000, the Midway Safe Harbor Center attempts to knock down some of these barriers.

Since it opened in 2005, the Midway Safe Harbor Center has been serving Title I Seminole County public school students, their families and the community. No Child Left Behind Act, Title I offers additional federal funding for school districts to provide extra educational services and activities that help students have a fair and equal opportunity to obtain high-quality education.

Open 365 days a year, the center offers homework help, physical fitness and character-building programs for kids; school credit recovery, career guidance and team sports programs to teens; and job search, fitness and crafts programs for adults. In addition, the center feeds about 45 students five days a week and every day during the summer. The center also hosts teen nights, which include dinner for approximately 45 teens and events, such as a Black History Month breakfast and a Veteran's Day dinner for 300 guests.

Through a partnership with Second Harvest, Midway Safe Harbor has been able to adequately serve meals to these after-school kids. In 2005, the center's and-serve kitchen that consisted only of a four-burner stove, a refrigerator and a small chest freezer, it was limited in the amount of food it could serve.

"Still, we were serving a lot of people out of a home kitchen," said Brenda Knight, Administrator and Lead Community Educator for 21 Century Centers.

With a larger commercial kitchen, Midway Safe Harbor would be able to cook, instead of just heat, meals and secure a greater variety of services from Second Harvest.

Enter RFMA Gives.

Searching for a Cause

RFMA Gives, the charitable arm of RFMA, was led this year by Jack McNertney, Senior Director of Facilities for Darden Restaurants, and Facilities for LongHorn Steakhouse at Darden.

Together, they searched for a non-profit food-service organization in the greater Orlando area that would benefit from a kitchen makeover.

After considering many worthy organizations, Midway Safe Harbor was chosen as the 2013 recipient.

McNertney and Bordelon were impressed by how many kids the center served with its modest kitchen and instantly saw the potential in upgrading the kitchen.

When Knight learned that RFMA Gives would give them a kitchen makeover, she thought she'd be required to match funds, which—she knew—remodel programs usually work.

"But when I asked about our contribution, they told me there was none," she said.

McNertney explained that RFMA members would take care of everything.

Dreaming Big

Knight was thrilled to be chosen—but hesitant when she was asked to come up with a kitchen wish list.

"At first, I was thinking small; I didn't want to be greedy, so I thought we'd get a new stove and maybe a new refrigerator," she said. She then asked her to dream bigger.

So, she consulted with the center's two cooks, who are both retired food-service managers, about what they would need to improve the food served, as well as be able to offer cooking classes.

Their revised wish list included:

- A walk-in freezer
- A six- or eight-burner stove
- Deeper convection ovens
- Hot-food holding cabinets
- Prep tables
- A chilled area
- A thawing unit
- A larger ice machine
- A three-bay sink
- Shelves
- A serving area instead of a long plastic table
- Higher-voltage electrical outlets

- Industrial food-prep utensils
- A separate air conditioning unit for the kitchen.

Borrowing the talents of a Darden kitchen design architect, the new kitchen layout was drawn up, and the staff started to get excited. With they would be able to teach cooking and food-handling classes to parents and teens in order to help them expand their skill set and m employers.

With the wish list in hand, McNertney began sourcing equipment from RFMA members, while Bordelon called upon RFMA vendors to the new kitchen. Finding people willing to help was not difficult, McNertney said.

“After we did the Denver project, and Brad and Libby of SAME Café told the RFMA community at the conference last year in Las Vegas how much it affected their life’s work, people were bawling in the audience; it was so emotional,” he said. “About 35 people signed t project at the conference alone.”

Demolition began on Jan. 5, 2013, and construction commenced the next day. Over the next four weeks, RFMA volunteers worked to dream into a reality.

“It was overly exciting to see [RFMA’s] professionalism, their kindness and true desire to do this for our program,” Knight said.

Because the kitchen was closed for the remodel, part of the center’s gym was converted into a temporary cafeteria. Luckily, the work wa break, when the center only serves about 40 kids a day.

RFMA volunteers brought in sheets of plywood to protect the gym’s floor, and because there was no way to heat frozen meals, Second on Wheels to provide afternoon snacks, such as sandwiches and drinks, for the kids.

A Perfect Fit

When the renovation was complete, Midway Safe Harbor hosted a ribbon- cutting and unveiling event for the parents, students, comr and other school board members.

The board members, in particular, were overjoyed when they saw the new kitchen. It was the kind of kitchen they had always envisioned did not have the funds for. Many commented about how well everything fit in the new kitchen.

“It looks like it has always been here,” Knight said. “It didn’t look crowded. RFMA did a great job with the design.”

The complete renovation, including labor, was estimated at just under \$300,000.

New Opportunities

The new kitchen paves the way for many opportunities.

With the large freezer and new refrigeration, Midway Safe Harbor can now accept a greater variety and quantity of food from Second t fresh vegetables, milk and cheese, increasing the amount of food served to each child.

“They now can have seconds if they request it, and the portion sizes can be more aligned to what is recommended,” Knight said. “We nc will run out before the last child has eaten.”

Second Harvest can now upgrade Midway Safe Harbor from a heat-and-serve kitchen to a Super Supper Kitchen, which provides addit staff members to assist in food preparation and to purchase food and supplies.

As for cooking, the kitchen is used daily for the after-school kids, as well as three nights a week for teen night. It is also used for specia program. And during the summer, the center will use the kitchen for the summer food program.

The new kitchen also allows Midway Safe Harbor to expand its curriculum. Students can now participate in hands-on cooking class Working with Seminole County Public Schools’ ePathways program, Midway Safe Harbor hopes to offer an elective credit in culinary a the next school year. These elective credits will help expand their job skills in the culinary/hospitality industry.

For families and the community, Midway Safe Harbor will offer evening workshops that focus on economical and healthy food ch preparation certification classes to increase their marketability in the job market.

Darden has offered to send cooking instructors to teach these classes. “We were so happy and pleased to be able to help,” McNertney reach out to me to talk to the staff about safe food handling. We hope we don’t stop now that the kitchen is built; we want to continue help

Expressing Thanks

Knight said that during the RFMA Gives presentation at this year’s annual conference in Orlando, she was so thankful to RFMA. But sf for allowing this project to happen.

“I felt like the honored guest, but it should have been the RFMA volunteers who were the honored guests,” she said. “It truly reflects th restaurant] industry and the organization.”

Midway Safe Harbor didn’t just get a new kitchen; they were given a great opportunity to expand on the good work they’re already doing l

“The impact is almost not measureable because it’s so immense,” Knight said. “For a community such as Midway to know that someone- outside of Midway values what we do, it brings back the belief in human nature; that people like to give and like to help out.”

Knight said they are using this experience as a teaching moment.

“Our children wanted to know why [RFMA] did this for us,” she said. “‘They don’t live here; why do they care?’ they asked. This responsibility, about giving back and paying it forward.”

Knight and her team have been inspired by RFMA’s generosity. They are in the process of finding a family or small business within the c way.

“Some people don’t realize that small changes can make a difference in a child’s life,” Knight said. “Small things can minimize the obs being everything they can be. I’ve seen great successes, but if you sit back and do nothing, we’re not going to change anything.”

For the RFMA Gives volunteers, this project is an extension of their profession, which they love.

“You can call it luck, you can call it good fortune or the stars were aligned, but for us, once we saw the opportunity, we knew what we ne
“And we always approached it by not looking at what it is but what it can be. We’re restaurant facility professionals; this is what we do ev
to do it and do it right.”