

TROPICAL LIFE

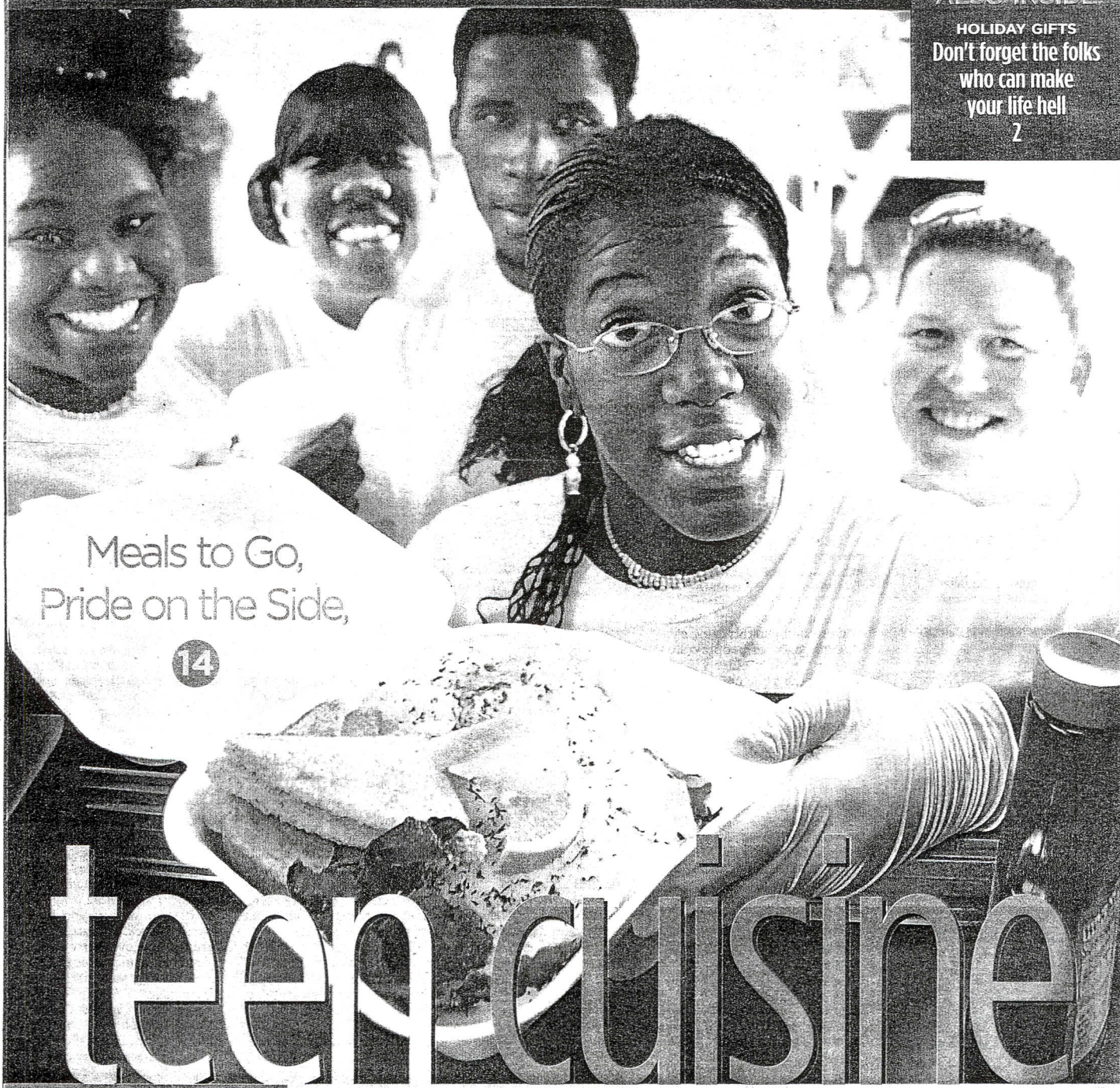
FOOD & DINING

ALSO INSIDE

HOLIDAY GIFTS

Don't forget the folks who can make your life hell

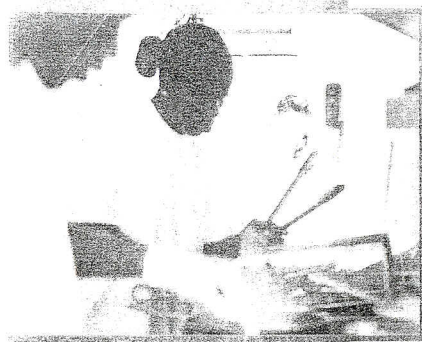
2



Meals to Go,
Pride on the Side,

14

teen cuisine



“I chop fast, and you know what else? I chop beautifully.”
 —Nakeil Jackson
 (pictured below)



PHOTOS BY NURI VALLBONA / HERALD STAFF

TRUE CALLING: Debbie Sanchez, at left, takes phone orders in the kitchen while Danyelle Carter, below left, waits on customers Kayla Allen and Ernest Alexander.

BY ELIZABETH HANLY
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This is the story of an exclusive if atypical school and a plateful of worthy lasagne. Depending on the day, that lasagne may become jambalaya, crab-fried rice or the meeker if ever popular lemon-pepper chicken breast on a garden salad.

A few dozen kids prepare and serve these dishes to paying customers. They work out of a small food-service trailer in a courtyard right behind Miami-Dade's Juvenile Justice complex at Northwest 27th Avenue and 33rd Street.

Some of them have been in jail or correctional facilities. Some have had serious truancy problems. Now, often by court order, they attend TROY Community Academy, a Miami-Dade Public Schools alternative education center operated in conjunction with the Department of Juvenile Justice that serves 70 students.

These are the scary kids, right? “They bring light into our lives like the Holy Ghost,” says Linda Louissant, whose work frequently brings her to the courthouse area. “Even if I wake up all sour, I see the kids — they're concentrating so hard, they're all in a hush when they work — well, no moré sour.”

The project, called Teen Cuisine, serves 100 meals even on a slow day, with items priced from 75 cents to \$5. Juvenile Justice workers — secretaries, cops, lawyers and denton staff — comprise the customer base, but the food is good enough to have earned a “best cheap eats” bouquet from Miami New Times a few years ago.

“I'm there every day,” says Jenny Leyva, a legal secretary. “I couldn't survive without them.”

“For breakfast I'll go for an egg white omelet or toast and sausage,” says Vanessa Chavez, another legal secretary. “Then at



“This is a program that gives kids a chance to be trusted again.”
 —Debbie Sanchez (at left),
 Teen Cuisine director

lunch I'll go for a green salad and some of those french fries. OK, I realize my lunch is not a balanced diet by anybody's standards, but there's something crazy good about those fries. Let's not even talk about the lasagne.”

It's not just anybody from TROY Academy who can work at Teen Cuisine; even taking out the proverbial garbage is a hard-won prize. Students have to accumulate points daily for classroom work exceptionally well done in order to earn one day a week at the trailer.

Nakeil Jackson is slight and plenty shy. He's in 12th grade, and this is his first year at TROY. It usually takes time to get all the rules right, but Nakeil pulled together so many points so fast, he nearly set a record.

Today he is chopping cucumbers, tomatoes and crab.

“I chop fast and you know what else? I chop beautifully,” he says.

Like all Teen Cuisine participants, Nakeil is paid \$20 per week. And then there are the tips. “Wednesday is the best,” he

says, nodding with dignity. “At the end of the day there're usually \$3 for each of us.”

How does he explain Teen Cuisine's success?

“The customers place their orders, we use buff ingredients, we deliver in a jiffy, and they come back for more.”

Nakeil isn't comfortable talking about the past. There was something about “being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” followed by three years at the Okeechobee Juvenile Offender Corrections Center. But now he's at TROY, and next year he plans to attend Miami-Dade College. He talks of “being there” as a psychologist for whomever might need him.

Like Nakeil, Shanreka White is in the 12th grade. She is tall. She radiates strength. She has been in the Teen Cuisine program for four years. As she puts it, “I like to eat.”

She likes to grow things, too, in the TROY Academy garden that helps supply Teen Cuisine. “Sometimes the tomatoes just don't know when to stop,” she

says.

Before she ever heard of TROY, Shanreka dreamed of attending a small school. Hit by a car at age 7, she developed a terror of crowds. She was homeschooled for five years, but then it was time to enroll in a middle school that served a thousand.

“I couldn't have gone to school. I would have stopped going to school,” she says. “I told my counselor, ‘Yeah, I'm with kids who have been to jail, but they are not so bad when you get to know them.’”

In fact, after a few months at TROY, Shanreka told her counselor she didn't need more counseling. Now, six years into the program, she intends to become a corrections officer. She'd like to see inmates treated with some humanity.

Teen Cuisine may not have given her a career path, but it has definitely expanded her horizons.

“I've learned to make things I never dreamed existed,” Shanreka says. “Miss Debbie taught me how to do up jambalaya and seafood fettuccine. Yes ma'am.

It's all about those dancing shrimp.”

Talk with nearly any student at TROY, and you'll hear tales of Miss Debbie — Debbie Sanchez, the vocational supervisor in charge of Teen Cuisine.

“This is a program that gives kids a chance to be trusted again,” she says.

Sanchez, a graduate of Johnson & Wales University, had her own catering business in Boca Raton 10 years ago when she spent an afternoon with a few students in TROY's then-fledgling Teen Cuisine program. Soon afterward, she was working with them full time.

“The only way I'd ever leave here is kicking and screaming,” she says.

Eleventh grader Curtis Wilson would like to be a fighter pilot. He has already scored a top-tier 5 on the math portion of the FCAT. He landed at TROY because of a bollixed transcript transfer, but quickly bought into the program. He makes sure to get there by 6:30 every morning to start making the juice and setting up the

TEEN CUISINE

The takeout trailer is open from 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. school days behind the Juvenile Court-house, 3300 NW 27th Ave., Miami. (Use the main entrance and be prepared to pass through a metal detector.)

Breakfast includes eggs done up in every kind of way. Add sausage and bacon, and the tab will still be under \$4. Cereals, fruit and muffins are less than \$1.

Lunch includes burgers, chicken, chili, sandwiches and tuna and egg salad. Even the famous jambalaya with salad can be had for \$5.

— ELIZABETH HANLY

condiment table for Teen Cuisine.

“Food is my favorite thing,” he says. “And Miss Debbie is teaching me how to cook all kinds of things. My personal favorite is bacon and eggs. My mom asks me to make it for her every Saturday morning. I've got a lot of brothers and sisters, but my mom says only my bacon and eggs taste really good.”

“I miss my friends,” Curtis says, “but they can wait. I used to be afraid in that other school. I'm not afraid here.”

SERVICE WITH A SMILE: Danyelle Carter works the window.

