

A recipe for recovery Struggling chef cooks for peers at group home

LOCAL

By Brian Saxton
THE NEWS-TIMES
DANBURY — Meet Tommy Cafferty.

He's 49, a professional chef with a cheerful smile and a man who's been battling depression and substance abuse so he can return to his greatest love — cooking.

One night last week, after a day of intensive prepping, Cafferty made a fresh chicken and pasta dish with leeks, vegetables and a homemade sauce.

His guests were the six other men who live with him at a three-story Danbury home run by Interlude, Inc. The private, non-profit group provides transitional support for individuals recovering from mental illness or substance use.

"It's been a struggle but I feel I'm repairing myself," said Cafferty, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, N.Y. "I didn't even know how to balance a checkbook when I got here."

On May 13, Cafferty is taking another step forward.



Photos by Autumn Pinette

Chef Tommy Cafferty samples a sauce he created at Interlude, a residential addiction recovery program.



Photos by Autumn Pinette

Tommy Cafferty prepares salad dressing.

"I think I'd always been interested in cooking," said Cafferty, who was raised in the Bronx.

As part of Interlude's annual fund-raising breakfast, Cafferty is volunteering his gastronomic skills in a silent auction for a gourmet dinner for four.

"I think it's a sign of Tommy's growth and how he is getting beyond his own internal turmoil," said Cynthia McLaughlin, who directs Interlude's recovery program. "I think it also recognizes how the agency has helped him."

Interlude, which has provided residential support for people with mental illness since 1978, today operates three residential programs for more than 40 clients a year in the Danbury and New Milford areas.

About 60 percent of the funding for Interlude comes from the state. The rest is raised through grants, foundations and private donations.

Cafferty, a longtime victim of bouts of depression and alcohol abuse, became a resident almost three years ago.

It wasn't always that way.

Cafferty's interest in cooking grew when he was 17 and took a job as a dishwasher in Westchester, N.Y.



Photos by Autumn Pinette

Tommy Cafferty tops off a plate of pasta with roasted pine nuts.

After graduating from the CIA, Cafferty worked in a French restaurant in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. He appeared on a master chef series on Public Television's Channel 13 and spent the summer of 1991 cooking for TV journalist Barbara Walters at Martha's Vineyard home.

Cafferty's personal problems began soon afterwards.

"I was having bouts of depression," said Cafferty. "I started drinking and went to various hospitals. When I first came here I didn't cook at all. I had no confidence."

In those days, Cafferty didn't even cook for himself and took food under the Meals-on-Wheels program.

Slowly but surely, Cafferty's confidence returned.

"I remember when I started to cook again," said Cafferty. "It was artichokes and vegetables. The pasta was pretty good."

One of Cafferty's companions, William Callahan, 47, who became an Interlude resident two years ago, is trying to tread the same path to recovery.

Born into a military family that was always on the move, Callahan spent most his younger life as an artist and musician, touring with bands in Europe and once playing with a production of "Jesus Christ Superstar."

"This place has saved my life and given me a second chance to live," said Callahan. "I've been in and out of hospitals but here I know there is someone who cares for me. We have a chance to figure out our mistakes. When this stage of my life is over, my goal is to try to give something back."

Likewise, Cafferty is trying to give something back by cooking meals for clients of the New Heights psycho-social program at Catholic Charities of Fairfield County Inc., as well as friends and residents of Interlude.

"I do the best I can with the (food) budget, but once a month I spend my own money making a nice meal," said Cafferty. "I'd really like to get back into private cooking, maybe some catering."

Cafferty gave a dinner party at Interlude over the weekend for 14 friends featuring baked clams, braised lamb shanks in a red wine vinegar apple cider sauce and a seafood pasta.

"I may make plum clafoutis for dessert, which is a custard," Cafferty said, mulling over his menu options. "I don't know yet."

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