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Women In Culinary Arts Celebrated at Peace Village Senior Living Community

Palos Park, IL - In celebration of Women's History Month, Peace Village Senior Living Community showcased six women cooks in a culinary experience that delighted residents. The women cooked at three pop up stations during the Women In Culinary event to serve a gourmet take on macaroni and cheese, tacos and a spring dessert of ice cream and scones, served to nearly 100 residents at Lakeside Place, one of three restaurants in the Village, located in Palos Park.

Cook Madi Valdes and Prep Cook Bethany Hopman prepared a crowd favorite of macaroni and cheese with smoked gouda, manchino and white cheddar cheeses. They also offered a variety of add-on toppings such as toasted bread crumbs, caramelized onions and bacon bits.

Valdes has been at the Village just three months, but has already made a big impression. Valdes' speciality is healthy cooking and creating menu items for those with alternative dietary needs and food allergies. She cooks for and presents at the Village's monthly Move Your Mind program. The program's goal is to maintain and improve brain function through a healthy diet, activities, exercise and more. Valdes has introduced residents to delicious healthy dishes that might be vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free or naturally sugar-free. "No one should ever go hungry when I'm around," said Valdes.

Hopman began her career at Peace Village as a server and was quickly promoted to the kitchen. Hopman has Downs Syndrome and is now a prep cook, adroit at garnishing work, peeling fruits and vegetables, cutting and chopping salad ingredients and slicing desserts. While Hopman enjoys the contributions she makes to the Village's culinary team, she believes the best part of her job is seeing her co-workers and the residents every day.

The taco station, offering both steak and shrimp tacos, featured Sandra Keepers and Shirley Zigmund, both long-time cooks at the Village. Zigmund has been at the Village for over twenty years and Keepers is known for her delicious comfort foods. This busy station featured a variety of toppings and sauces; each taco was custom-made for each resident by the cooks. Resident Nick Thies enjoyed a shrimp taco and said, "They are real good - real different. A very good combination of flavors."

Spring flavors were trumpeted at the dessert station. Cooks Deidre Johnson and Amanda Koran baked lavender scones to serve with homemade peach ice cream and topped with a lemon

mascarpone and blackberry sauce. The presentation was made especially spring-like by a garnish of brightly colored edible flowers. Lead Cook Johnson is classically trained and Koran has extensive baking experience. "Dessert is our thing," the cooks laughed.

Joan Swiecicki, Assistant Director of Dining, said, "We have six of the best right here. When Chef Jason (Ison) brought the idea to them, they were all eager to participate. They immediately said, "Oh, I know what I'm doing!" They are so abundantly talented and willing to share their knowledge with each other and the residents. These women bring new ideas and new experiences to our residents all the time. I know it's backwards to ask them to work at their own celebration, but their work is really their joy."

To further show their appreciation for these six cooks and their dedication to their craft, each cook received a set of professional knives and a bouquet of roses from Chef Ison. Each station proudly displayed their flowers, along with a festive cluster of balloons.

Chef Ison said, "The culinary industry needs to put a bigger emphasis on women everywhere - in restaurants, catering, leadership and in schools. This world does have some work to do in terms of equality and we need to get more women into professional kitchens. Thankfully here, we really do value the work these women do. This day is all about them, getting them out of the back and meeting the residents."

Swiecicki notes that Morrison Living, Peace Village's culinary management partner, makes it a policy to promote from within, a positive step in bringing needed equality to the industry. Currently, while women make up about 59% of culinary school graduates, less than 7% are in executive chef positions and fewer than 25% are chefs or cooks. In other professional settings, women tend to be shunted to the salad or dessert line. At the Village, however, nearly 50% of the cooks are women.

That came as a surprise to Joan Dietmann, Janet Finnigan and Betty Holke. Holke, a Village resident for almost six years, said, "I didn't realize we had so many (women cooks). It's really nice to meet them." Finnigan said, "This is a great thing to celebrate. I love not having to cook - it's why I moved here." Holke laughed, "I miss it a little and that makes me an oddball here."

JoAnn Duffy has lived at the Village about six months and says it just makes sense to celebrate these women cooks as it's usually women who do the bulk of the cooking at home.

Josephine Rodriguez, seated with friends Dina Pylman, Bonnie Verkinder, Valerie Kiburn and Noreen Joyce, celebrates being at the Village every day. "It's terrific to celebrate these women," Rodriguez said, "and the food - did you taste that ice cream? Every day here is an experience. There is always something going on and you're never alone - unless you want to be."

Verkinder was the veteran at the table, having lived at the Village for eleven years now. "When my daughter and I were looking for a place for me to move, everywhere else we went, it was so quiet when we walked in. This place was different. I heard laughing, talking and singing. I heard people really living and enjoying themselves. And you can't find a more beautiful setting here,

with the beautiful trees, walking path and the flowers! The surroundings - no where else can compare."

Pylman moved into the Village 5 years ago and says, "We all like this place. It's home. It just feels like home."

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