

KEISHA ALLEN CANNOT CONTAIN HER ENTHUSIASM. She and her three teenage kids have just finished a dinner of chicken fingers and rice and beans. As they prepare to leave Cathedral Kitchen, Camden's largest community food program, their arms are laden with pastel-hued cupcakes to be savored later.

Allen, 36, is impressed by the Kitchen's new home on Federal Street, which opened on November 3. "After I first came in the other day, I went home and bragged to my grandma and my aunt: It's clean, it's big, and the man said they got donations from rich people to help build it," she gushes.

In this ravaged county seat of 80,000, 44 percent of residents live in poverty, according to 2005 U.S. Census data. Plopped amidst shabby lots, shattered buildings, and abandoned cars, the Kitchen's new low-slung brick-and-glass building stands

Kitchen's executive director. "We got to design the space from scratch. It's been like a dream come true."

The dream could not have come true at a better time for the Kitchen's clients. Talarico reports that the Kitchen now serves 8,500 meals each month, a 10 percent increase over last year. Given the state of the economy, the demand is only expected to increase.

Standing behind a stainless steel kitchen counter, Sister Jean Spina surveys the dining room sprawling before her. "It's unbelievable," she says, shaking her head of short-cropped gray hair. "We almost don't know what to do with all of this space. Oh, look at that, they're still coming," she interrupts herself. "Thank you, Jesus." On a typical night, the Kitchen will serve about 380 people, feeding them food purchased by Cathedral Kitchen or donated by organizations such as Philabundance (a Philadelphia food bank), the Southern Regional Food Bank, and local bakeries and restaurants.

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out. Downtown boasts an attraction-filled waterfront and a planned office park, but here, less than a mile away, the terrain looks bleak.

Inside, at least, it's warm. As the waning light streams through clerestory windows, a small woman, Theresa Priolli, 46, rushes in. "I can't believe how quiet this place is!" she says. Unknowingly singling out one of the building's distinct design features—a row of tangerine-hued panels that add texture and depth to the space while serving as sound-absorbers—Priolli says it's her first time visiting the new digs. "I was doing okay until my food was stolen from the freezer at my rooming house," she says. "But I like to come in once in awhile, anyway. This place isn't just about a meal," she adds. "It's where you can see people, check in on them."

For clients like Priolli, as well as for the eleven staff members and volunteer corps of 400 who keep things running, this \$3.9 million, 12,500-square-foot space has been a long time coming. Founded in 1976 by four young Camden residents who borrowed the school cafeteria of a local parish, the Kitchen got off to a roaring start. It scored early donations from Campbell Soup Company, the food giant that's called Camden home since 1869, and soon relocated to a century-old row house at the foot of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. After a series of moves, the Kitchen purchased a building in 2002. Its plans, though, were quickly stymied by the city of Camden's own redevelopment efforts.

"An office park was already coming to fruition in that location," says Carrie Turner, assistant executive director of the Camden Redevelopment Agency, referring to a 100-acre development to be anchored by Campbell's new \$90 million headquarters. The city found a new location for the Kitchen in East Camden, bought its other building, and agreed to pick up costs involved in excavation and environmental remediation at the new site.

In retrospect, the snag was the best thing that could have happened. "It worked out perfectly," says Karen Talarico, the

Spina, a Dominican nun and former phys ed teacher, started volunteering at the Kitchen after she retired. Now a member of the small staff, she works closely with the resident cook, "Pop" Jones. It's a streamlined operation, with Pop turning out potfuls of stew and mounds of mashed potatoes. Volunteers plate the dinners, and set them on the tables before everyone files in.

There is no soup line.

At the previous downtown location, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception's gym, Pop toiled in a 12-by-13-foot back room and made do with just a four-burner electric range and one convection oven. Now, he commands a professionally designed commercial kitchen with walk-in storage, full dishwashing facilities, extensive food prep areas, and conveniences such as a tilting skillet, a griddle, two convection ovens, two fryers, and a ten-burner range. "I've been dreaming of this for years," laughs the 82-year-old former army cook. "Getting to see it has been a marvel, never mind working in it."

David Schultz, principal of DAS Architects, remembers visiting the old kitchen and being "amazed at what they were accomplishing." The Philadelphia-based hospitality designers came to the project via Clemens Construction Company, with whom they had built Rat's, the tony eatery at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton. "We really were intrigued by the idea of using the knowledge that's available to high-end restaurants to serve a quite different population," says Schultz, who has designed for acclaimed chefs like Georges Perrier. "The challenge all along was how to make it easier for everybody to do their work, while creating a space that was more inspirational than institutional. There wasn't much out there as a model," he adds. As if the project were not ambitious enough, the architects also aimed for LEED-certification, garnering points for everything from the use of recycled materials and rainwater collection systems to provisions for storing recyclables and washing dishes (thereby cutting down on disposables).

Aside from offering the firm's services at cost, Schultz took

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THE KITCHEN SCENE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Shanina Wilson and William Willis enjoy the ambiance at Cathedral Kitchen; the LEED-certified building designed by Philadelphia-based DAS Architects; Sister Jean Spena dishes out another meal; Theresa Priolli, Keisha L. Allen (middle), and her daughter Tiffany Coston on their first visit to the new space.



This place isn't just about a meal," says Kitchen patron Theresa Priolli. "It's where you can see people, check in on them."



an active role in fundraising, soliciting money and in-kind donations from his company's subcontractors and clients. Additional monies came from institutional and corporate funders (including Campbell); state and local government agencies chipped in about one-third of costs.

The Camden Redevelopment Agency has modest hopes for the Kitchen's neighborhood, called Marlton. "The current administration's thinking on it is to keep the complexion of light industry and manufacturing," says the agency's Turner. City planners, she adds, "see a possibility of using Cathedral Kitchen as a jumping-off point for bringing in other service providers for this populace."

Such co-locating already has a head start. A food pantry that distributes donated groceries is located down the block. Pantries like this operate all over town, and two other venues—the Neighborhood Center, which serves lunch, and Frank's Place, a shelter that offers snacks—help feed Camden's needy. "But we're it for

dinner," says Talarico.

She and her crew are looking at additional ways to serve the community in their new home. Possibilities include partnering with organizations to provide case-management services or medical and dental care, using the kitchen as a job-training center for culinary trades, or putting together snack packs for clients to take home over the weekend.

"It all comes down to space," says Talarico. "We can accept larger quantities of food, we can manage our inventory better, we can offer other services in our meeting rooms."

The new space will allow the Kitchen to eventually offer weekend dinners. "We're seeing more and more families," Talarico says, "so, unfortunately, I'm sure our overall numbers will continue to increase. It really is a sad comment on the times." ■

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