

## Peers Bring Skills to the Community

Through the Community Food Advisor Program

By KYM WOLFE

If you're a recent empty nester, sometimes it's not easy cooking for one or two instead of a whole family. If you're on a tight budget, you might want some recipes for healthy eating that will stretch your grocery dollar. If you're a young offender who is getting ready to live on your own, you might want to learn the basics of food shopping and cooking before you reintegrate into the mainstream community.

For each of these scenarios and many more, agencies in London — from the Salvation Army to the Memorial Boys & Girls Club — call on the London Community Resource Centre to send out a Community Food Advisor (CFA) to help. The CFA program has been quietly working with local groups since 1992, sending out trained peer volunteers who use presentations and hands-on demonstrations to teach nutrition and label reading, low-fat cooking, cooking basics for kids, and other topics. In fact, London was one of the three original communities in Ontario to pilot the program twenty years ago; now sixteen different communities and more than 400 volunteers are involved across the province.

CFA volunteers are a special breed, says Linda Davies, LCRC's executive director. "They are motivated by a passion for food and a deep-rooted need to help others." As well as food-related skills and knowledge, volunteers often bring cultural, religious, occupational, educational and family



experiences to the table. "Individuals are often more open to receiving information from peers," says Davies.

There are currently twenty active volunteers in London, ranging from young adults, many of them students at Brescia University College, to retirees. Each has gone through an initial 36 hours of training, as well as an annual recertification process. The programs they deliver were developed by registered dietitians from the Nutrition Resource Centre at the Ontario Public Health Association. "Although we used canned presentations, we pull out what is most relevant to a particular audience," says Davies.

And there is a wide range of audiences, including seniors groups who are interested in healthy eating for healthy aging, families with children, collective kitchen groups, and at-risk youth, many of whom need to start with cooking basics. Davies has witnessed how powerful that experience can be, noting "when you learn how to cook and look after yourself, something changes; it's a very empowering experience."

This year LCRC will have a few more irons in the fire, as they have added some new offerings to the CFA menu. The Nutrition Resource Centre has developed five new adult cooking modules, and London CFAs will be piloting two of them: vegetarian cooking and healthy baking.

At the end of April, LCRC held a special peer

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training session at Covent Garden Market for people who know how to can but wanted to learn training skills. They can now run canning workshops for different groups in the city.

Perhaps the most ambitious initiative is the Grow, Cook, Learn program, which provides both gardening and cooking workshops. The program will start with a demonstration garden at East London Anglican Ministries' church, where fruits and vegetables will be grown both in the ground and in box gardens.

"When cooking classes start, participants will visit the garden to harvest food that will be used in the meal. It creates a connection with the food and reinforces skills for cooking with fresh fruits and vegetables. That transferable knowledge will spill over into the way they buy and cook in the future," explains Davies, who is hopeful that Grow, Cook, Learn can be replicated in other parts of the city in future years. "It's a scalable project and will be funded through donations. We would like to have at least four running, in the north, south, east and west."

Community Food Advisors and Grow, Cook, Learn are just two food-related

programs that LCRC runs. For more information on all of their food initiatives, including Community Gardens, Grow a Row, and Cook It Up!, Davies recommends people visit [www.lcrc.on.ca](http://www.lcrc.on.ca) or the LCRC Facebook page. Ultimately, she says, all of the programs are designed to help Londoners eat smart, eat healthy and eat local.

### Community Food Advisor Program

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[www.lcrc.on.ca/community\\_food\\_advisor.html](http://www.lcrc.on.ca/community_food_advisor.html)

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