



*Culinary Arts participants and banquet guests at PBMR.*

## A Bit of This and a Dash of That

*by Fr. Dave Kelly, C.P.P.S., PBMR Director*

When you walk into the Precious Blood Center on a Saturday morning you are met with the smells and sounds of a busy kitchen. Each Saturday morning nine youth sporting hairnets and aprons, gather to combine ingredients that will become a feast fit for royalty. They listen carefully to the instructions of Chef Tony amidst the clanging of bowls and pans, each one busily stirring or sautéing, cutting or mixing as the day's menu takes shape.

The ten weeks "Culinary Arts" program just finished with a grand celebration—a feast of harvest salad, rotisserie chicken, sautéed string beans, rice pilaf and, of course, cheese cake. Families, neighbors, probation officers, and our local juvenile judge gathered as the Precious Blood Center was transformed into a banquet hall.

I remember well when we visited my grandparents, the small kitchen became the gathering place. Well, on Saturday late morning and early afternoon, the most popular place in the neighborhood is the kitchen area of PBMR. The day usually starts with youth inquiring about the day's menu: "Hey Chef, what are we cooking today?" And from that announcement—after the groceries are unpacked, hairnets donned, aprons secured, and hands scrubbed and sanitized—the transformation begins.

Amidst the violence and the chaos that claim the lives of so many youth, to watch this happen—the

laughter mixed with the intensity of cutting up a full chicken—you can't help but recognize that these young men long for a caring and guiding adult. You begin to understand that the real value isn't just learning skills in the kitchen, but learning life lessons. It is not just good cooking, but also good relationship. Chef Tony, who is African-American, is not just a culinary arts instructor, he is a mentor and a life coach. Along with the instructions on how to slice and dice, he helps them understand what it means to move into adulthood as a young man. He constantly reinforces that they are important and talented.

"Pay attention", he'll remind them, "this is important." He will drive home the point that keeping a clean kitchen and taking care of the utensils is just as important as the ingredients. In between his cooking instructions, he engages the young men in other life skills.

Now with this session over, interest is high and hope is alive. One of the youth goes on an interview with a restaurant a short distance from here. Another youth ponders going to culinary school, and still another wonders what it would take to open his own restaurant.

Sr. Donna has already asked Chef Tony and the youth to cook up some goodies for the upcoming fundraiser. I am already looking forward to the next session of culinary arts. ♦