

THE CHARLIE CART PROJECT

COOKING
CLASSES IN
LIBRARIES?

BEYOND
BOOKS

WAIT.

WHAT?

Charlie Cart food literacy programs teach more than just cooking at your local library.



THREE
SUCCESS
STORIES



If you can't bring the kids to the kitchen, why not take the kitchen to the kids? The Charlie Cart is a fully-equipped kitchen classroom on wheels, enabling educators to lead hands-on cooking lessons in any setting.



The Charlie Cart Project is a Berkeley, California-based non-profit offering an all-in-one program for food and nutrition education, centered on a modern mobile kitchen. Passionate about both health and food system reform, Charlie Cart supports its network with: system-wide training; a cooking curriculum that connects the dots between food, health, and the environment; and, peer-to-peer support for Charlie Cart educators around the country.



Photo: Phillip Greenberg

Charlie Carts & Libraries: A Delicious Match

The Charlie Cart Project was originally envisioned for schools, as a means for children to cook and taste fresh food and experience the joy of eating what they prepare. And while schools have been early adopters of the program, growing interest has also come from libraries.

In the past five years, librarians have increasingly found support to bring Charlie Cart's food education program to their patrons—and not just their youngest visitors. While the Charlie Cart Project's kitchens on wheels have been put to frequent use teaching elementary-age children in libraries across the country, they've also provided programming to teens, college students, families, adults, patrons with special dietary needs, regulars with culturally-specific eating practices, and those with tight food budgets—some of whom obtain their groceries from food pantries.

As of January 2021, 45 Charlie Carts can be found in 38 public library programs in 21 different states, accounting for about 21 percent of Charlie Cart Project clients.

"Today's public librarians have an ever-widening job description—from supporting the unhoused to managing digital collections and overseeing diverse programming," says Charlie Cart founder Carolyn Federman. "Libraries have stepped up to fill a void in their communities,

**TODAY'S LIBRARIES
PROMOTE LITERACY
OF ALL KINDS.**

to provide a social safety net. And they've shown they have the flexibility, leadership, and commitment to innovation to meet the needs of their patrons," she adds.

"Many are embracing culinary education as an important aspect of their work, connecting the dots between health, food, and the environment. Librarian trailblazers who lead hands-on cooking lessons serve as change agents within their organizations and communities."

The Charlie Cart Project's goal for library partnership: Provide the tools and training for library staff to facilitate regular cooking and nutrition lessons for both adults and children that encourage healthy food choices, foster nutritional awareness, and impart kitchen skills to local residents. These newly skilled food educators, in turn, provide peer-to-peer support within their own library branch systems and beyond.

Cooking classes in libraries? Wait. What?

Public libraries are trusted, beloved institutions considered vital to community well-being. Libraries are more than just venues to read books and find resources: They serve as places of shelter and safety, especially for vulnerable populations. They are valued sites for interaction across diverse demographic groups. And they function as de facto community centers, where residents can connect

**HUNGRY
CHILDREN CAN'T
LEARN.**

to educational, economic, cultural, social, and wellness opportunities.

Sociologist Eric Klinenberg cites libraries as "the textbook example of social infrastructure in action."* Today's libraries promote literacy of all kinds. In addition to offering access to books, periodicals, videos, computers, and wi-fi, libraries provide patrons a place to: apply for a passport, enroll in citizenship readiness classes, attend an ESL lesson, work on a resume, find homework support, enjoy story time, access information about social programs, obtain legal referrals and help with taxes, take the GED, connect to veteran resources and more. And most of these services are free.

One of the more surprising developments in library programming over the past several years has been culinary literacy, offered through a variety of programming, such as cooking classes, cookbook reading clubs, and culinary community events. As centers of lifelong learning through both traditional and nontraditional pathways, culinary literacy fits firmly within the library mission.

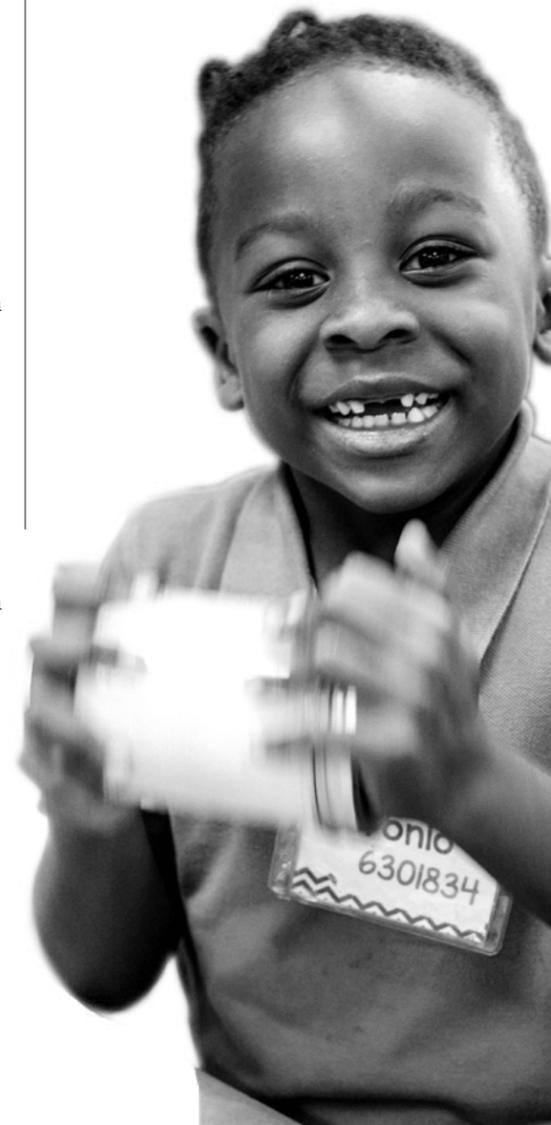
a library each year. They provide common ground and are uniquely placed to reach all ages and socio-economic backgrounds as shared spaces dedicated to inclusivity, information, and inspiration.

Cooking programs provide an opportunity to educate library users on a range of topics from health and nutrition to life skills (such as how to use a knife, plan a menu, and build a shopping list). Hands-on cooking lessons effortlessly reinforce core academic skills—math through measuring, ratios, and scaling a recipe up or down; literacy through reading

Not only are libraries widely trusted, librarians individually are considered trustworthy, informed, and accessible members of the community. Given that, they're uniquely placed to offer cooking and nutrition programming to patrons. Visitors to public libraries view the institutions as important resources for finding health information. Seventy-three percent of those aged 16 and over say libraries contribute to people finding the health information they need, according to the Pew Research Center's 2015 report, *Libraries at the Crossroads*.

Everyone has a relationship to food. Everyone needs to be able to feed themselves. But not all Americans have access to the information and skills they need about food to nourish themselves well. Enter libraries, with their progressive programming and tremendous reach: There are 9,000 public library systems across the United States, serving 95% of the population. There are more public library branches (16,568) than Starbucks cafes (14,606), according to the American Library Association. More than half of all Americans visit

* New York University sociologist and author, *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*



recipes, following steps, and learning culinary vocabulary and new ingredients; and science through the interaction and transformation of ingredients into finished dishes. Cooking opens a window to experience culture, history, and foodways, and connects these subjects to agriculture and the environment. And it's fun! Cooking and eating bring all types of people together through a shared activity to learn and be nourished. At a time when the U.S. is deeply divided, this opportunity to share in something all of us have in common is a rarity.

While there are similarities in how different library systems use their Charlie Cart/s—some systems have more than one— there are also

unique features to each, depending on the demographics of the patrons they serve, their geographic location, and the interests, expertise, and passions of the culinary champions leading cooking programming in these library branch settings.

The carts have also proven catalysts for some librarians' careers—case in point: Lia Kharis Hillman, a program manager at the San Francisco Public Library. In 2016, Hillman was honored by the American Library Association with an "I Love My Librarian Award" for her community cooking classes, taught from a Charlie Cart dubbed the Biblio Bistro. Hillman, a former chef, established a garden and food education program in library branches across San Francisco, reaching

underserved families who face challenges with cooking.

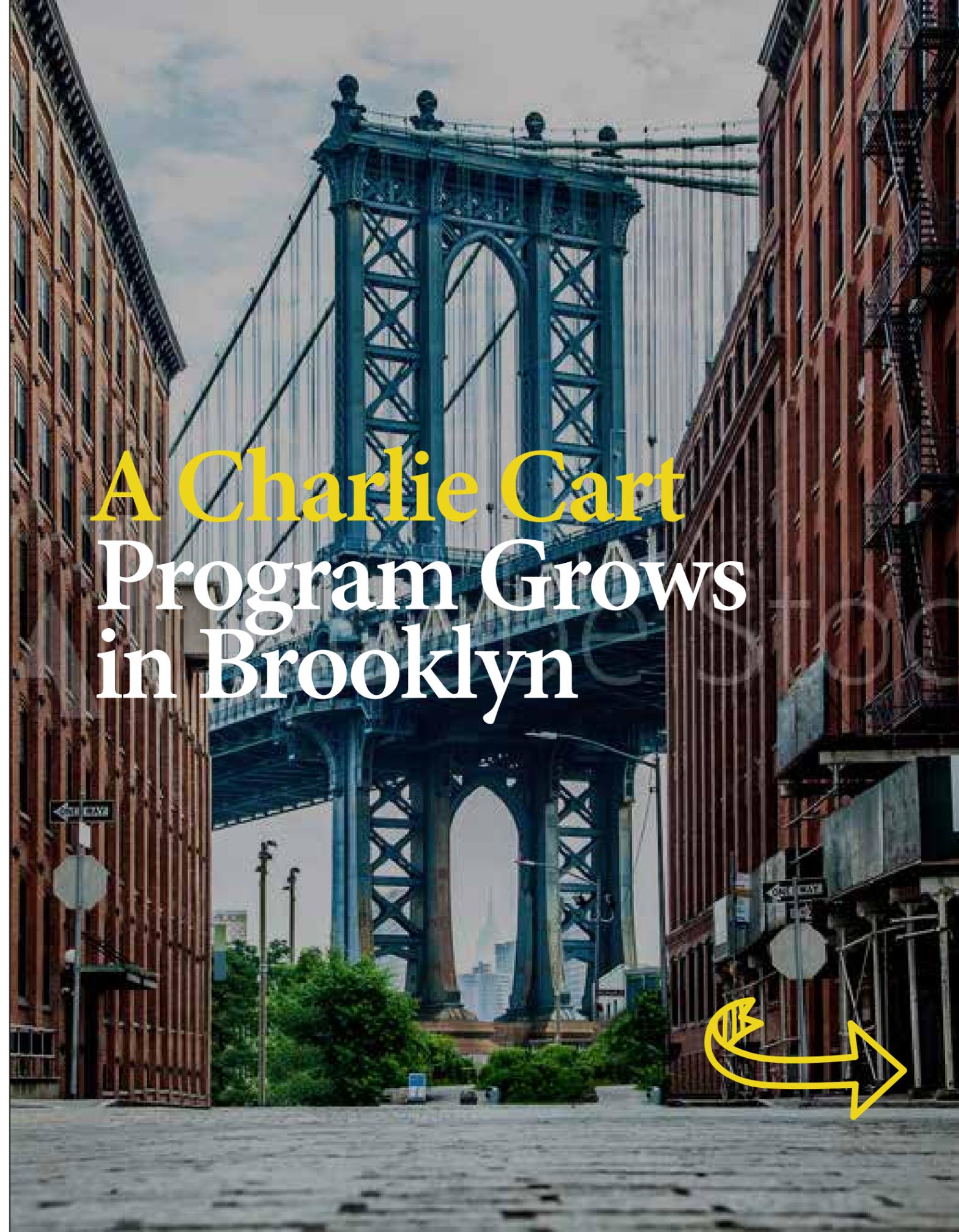
Federman says the Charlie Cart Project's library clients are "deeply embedded in their communities and eager to work with partner organizations—including food banks, schools, cultural organizations, restaurants, and non-profits—to enrich their food literacy programming and help foster community-wide food systems change."

The three institutions profiled here offer examples of successful programs, tailored to the local community and championed by librarians who are innovating to meet the changing needs of their patrons.

Editor's Note: Material for these case studies was gathered prior to the pandemic. Librarians have found creative ways to adapt programs during this challenging time, through partnerships, community outreach, and innovation. They look forward to returning to in-person Charlie Cart programming.

EVERYONE
NEEDS TO BE
ABLE TO FEED
THEMSELVES.

A Charlie Cart Program Grows in Brooklyn



It's Yom Kippur in Brooklyn, New York, which means that public schools are closed for the day and members of the Jewish community are fasting—that includes Johanna Lewis, a senior librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library's Central Library. On this October day in 2019, she's hosting the library's Charlie Cart program.

Her colleague in cooking classes, Adeeba Afshan Rana, a young adult librarian based at the Brighton Beach branch, is sympathetic: She held a cooking class during Ramadan, the month of fasting for the Muslim community. "I remember I went to prayers in the morning and then I came to the library and taught a class on how to make my mom's chicken korma," says Adeeba. "Johanna and I joke about how we have somehow managed to hold a cooking class on both of our most holy days when we're fasting."

On this day, the pair are busy prepping for a class for young adults at the main branch; they've "borrowed" the children's reading room for the activity. The recipe of the day:

a seasonal Three Sisters Sauté, a slightly tweaked version of a Charlie Cart Project recipe, that includes beans, squash, and corn. Adeeba is excited by the honey-nut squash she's picked up, a new hybrid variety, dubbed a butternut squash "mini-me," and designed for maximum flavor and nutrients. They'll roast the squash in the convection oven that comes with the cart and have participants do a taste test. Johanna is jazzed about the cranberry beans she bought from the Park Slope Coop, where she is a member. First on the list of tasks for students on a large sign-up sheet next to the CookMobile, (as the Charlie Cart is called here), "Shell cranberry beans: everyone."

Other jobs include slicing zucchini into half-moons, cutting peppers into strips, mincing garlic, juicing lemons, destemming and chopping parsley. Participants are encouraged to choose their own culinary adventure and attach their name to various jobs.

The young adults, who range in age from 17 to 20, are from all over the borough. Most of them don't know each other, but have a connection to one of the librarians and have some cooking experience. The group of ten are attentive, engaged, respectful, friendly—and work very efficiently. They politely make introductions, divvy up jobs, and get down to the business of cutting and cooking. A student asks if the group can listen to music while they work—it's encouraged, and a speaker is located. His playlist proves popular: Patrons and librarians alike bop to the beat of Beyoncé, Earth, Wind & Fire, and Corrine Bailey Rae. "Music can help students focus; for others it's part of the enjoyment of the cooking experience, and cooking in community," says Adeeba, who moves between the youthful participants seated at tables with large cutting



Librarians at Brooklyn Public Library's Central Library make spiced flatbread as part of the Charlie Cart Project training.

Photo: Phillip Greenberg

boards and adult-sized knives. She seems to be checking in on their emotional health and well-being, as much as their culinary competency.

Teachable moments and catchy tunes

Meanwhile, Johanna anchors the cart and shares core culinary messaging. She demonstrates cutting methods from the Charlie Cart Curriculum Guide, including "the claw," which emphasizes how to safely use a knife to chop produce. There's some cooking technique talk: a discussion about the difference between sautéing and frying. She also touches on the cultural, historical, and agricultural significance of The Three Sisters companion planting as practiced by Native Americans, which is also included in the Charlie Cart Curriculum. A handout explains the Maillard Reaction: what happens

when a dry protein hits a heated pan and begins to brown.

Kateri Rothschild, a mother of three, floats between the participants keeping an eye on knife skills and suggesting tweaks to handling practices, as needed. The smell of garlic wafts through the room, there's the sizzle as vegetables hit the pan. There's chatter about when to add salt, whether to include olives in the dish, and how rolling a lemon before you cut it helps to liberate the juice.

The vibe is relaxed, but focused. Teachable moments are sprinkled into the 90-minute cooking session, but there's nothing heavy-handed about the educational component of class. The conversation is wide-ranging and designed to facilitate community building and connection. The three librarians—all accomplished home cooks—work well together as

COOKING IS AN IDEAL TEACHING TOOL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

Brooklyn Public Library

Where

Brooklyn Public Library, Brighton Beach Library, Brooklyn, NY

What

The Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) is the fifth-largest library system in the United States, with 60 branches serving 2.6 million New York residents. BPL Programming: In 2018, BPL provided more than 72,000 free programs for all ages and stages of life for its diverse patrons.

How

BKLYN Incubator, an internal funding source for innovative library programming within the Brooklyn Library system. BKLYN Incubator is supported by The Charles H. Revson Foundation and Robin K. and Jay L. Lewis.

Program Champions

Johanna Lewis, senior librarian, Central Library
Adeeba Afshan Rana, young adult librarian, Brighton Beach Library
Kateri Rothschild, library circulation supervisor, Highlawn Library

Local Partners

The Leon M. Goldstein High School for the Sciences

What are they listening to?

Young Adult Cooking Class Playlist
Soundtrack courtesy Kevin Rutledge, Brooklyn, New York, October 2019

September, Earth, Wind & Fire
Your Song, Elton John
I'm Coming Out, Diana Ross
Come on Eileen, Dexy's Midnight Runners
Higher & Higher, Jackie Wilson
Karma Chameleon, Culture Club
Always Be My Baby, Mariah Carey
Come and Get Your Love, Redbone
On Our Own, Bobby Brown
Put Your Records On, Corinne Bailey Rae
Valerie, Amy Winehouse
Too Late to Turn Back Now, Cornelius Brothers
Sir Duke, Stevie Wonder
Real Love, Mary J. Blige
Before I Let Go, Beyoncé



Cooking lessons engage all the senses.

Photo: Marianna Nobre

a team. This is not their first rodeo. Although the Charlie Cart is relatively new to the library—Brooklyn piloted the program at the Brighton Branch in the summer of 2019—they all have previous experience teaching cooking with patrons.

And they all participated in Charlie Cart Project’s hands-on, intensive training in April 2019, which was attended by 25 staff from 15 different branch locations. “It was interactive—so the three hours ran through quickly—it was interesting and educational. It explained the framework of social justice and how we’re helping our communities,” noted participant Brian Hasbrouck, library information supervisor in the New Lots branch in East New York, which has since had Charlie Cart programming at its branch. “It was a space where expertise was respected; I can’t make a killer vinaigrette, but

“I can do other things,” Brian added. “Everyone felt comfortable sharing their views.”

The training is designed to help librarians get comfortable with the carts so they can lead classes at their branches. Library staff aren’t the only ones whose self-assurance is bolstered by the program. “Cooking is an ideal teaching tool for young people, it gives them myriad ways to participate and build self-confidence,” says Adeeba. Brooklyn library’s program—draws on and adapts the Charlie Cart Project Curriculum for its users and emphasizes that cooking can be simple, enjoyable, cost effective, healthy, and delicious. In 2019 the CookMobile served more than 600 patrons at 21 events.

Rolling Out Roti, Riffing on Life

In the six-week program at Brighton Beach, the librarians linked food literacy lessons to science, reading, math, food preparation, and health. They also covered food justice and food access, global food traditions, and local food culture. And they touched on deciphering food labels, critiquing food politics, discussing body positivity, explaining diet-related illnesses, and brainstorming meal planning. “Sometimes we just talk about whatever our kids want to talk about. The role of a young adult librarian is all about relationship building and trust building,” says Adeeba. “Some students didn’t really talk a lot until they started cooking with us. That’s when you really get to know them. I watched one senior expertly roll out roti, I asked him about it, and that’s when I learned about his West Indian background.”

The Brighton Beach branch is a relatively small library a block or so from the ocean and the Coney Island boardwalk. It serves a culturally diverse mix of patrons including Russian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Mexican, and Chinese residents. But the teens who frequent the library—including a core group of African American males—come from all over Brooklyn, as there are two public high schools in the area.

“We’re like their afterschool parents, we have a group of about 20 to 30 regulars who come in every day,” says Adeeba. “We love feeding them because teenagers are hungry. They’re hungry all the time. And hungry students can’t learn.”

The librarians are focused on imparting life skills for independent living. “Teens and young adults need to know how to feed themselves and how to eat a diverse range of foods that are healthy,” says Johanna. “We also want our young people to have important life skills—like knowing how to safely and efficiently use a knife. We want them to be able to go home and use the skills they’ve learned here with confidence to cook for themselves, their friends, or their family.”

Their biggest challenges with the mobile kitchen? Maneuvering the cart on wheels takes some finessing (shout out to the facilities staff who can fit the cart into the Brooklyn main branch elevator like a boss).

Did they need any other equipment? They added larger cutting boards and

knives—suitable for their teen target audience—to the mix. And they also sprung for a portable dishwasher. It travels with the cart to the branches. “Sanitation is important to us. We like having children clean up, it’s a beautiful thing, and we do have them do that,” says Adeeba. “And also, children do not wash dishes in the way we want our dishes washed, so that’s where the dishwasher comes in.”

The library’s marketing team dubbed the mobile kitchen The CookMobile and customized the front of the cart to give it a little extra flair—there’s a slice of watermelon, a strawberry, an avocado half, a whole fish—as well as a chicken drumstick, a slice of pizza, and a sausage. And a mermaid because, well, both Adeeba and Johanna like mermaids, and why not?

Call for a Cooking Class: Adulthood 101

The 2019 classes were well attended, about 12 to 24 participants per event. The Brighton Beach team did outreach at a local schools, They made guacamole and salsa for students and handed out flyers about upcoming summer classes.

How do they measure success? No hospitalizations, the librarians say in unison with a laugh. On a more serious note: the fact that participants keep coming back. Their most popular recipe to date was Rasta Pasta, so called because the ingredients include red, green, and orange peppers. Johanna made the jerk seasoning blend with students from scratch. It’s a creamy, carb-y,

SOME STUDENTS DIDN'T REALLY TALK A LOT UNTIL THEY STARTED COOKING WITH US.

I LOVE THE CAMARADERIE OF COOKING.

cheese and chicken dish with a bunch of vegetables and a kick—what’s not to like? “We both care about where our food comes from,” says Johanna. “So, we try to source the best ingredients we can. We buy our meat from a halal or kosher butcher; we want to make sure everyone can eat.”

During the class, each student takes a turn stirring the sauté, they clean up their own workstation and place used equipment destined for the dishwasher after class into a large, zippered, rinseable bag that comes with the cart for transporting dirty dishes. As food is served up, the youth start swapping contact details. There’s enough for seconds; everything gets eaten and is awarded a thumbs up for tastiness. Adeeba asks the group to share one thing that surprised them during the class and one thing they’d like to know more about.

“I love the camaraderie of cooking—a lot of us are on our phones all the time—it’s refreshing to talk,” says one student, to widespread nods.

“I love being in the kitchen, but I’m in college and I am pressed for time,

and yet I feel like I need to learn how to be an adult and cook for myself,” says another. Everyone agrees.

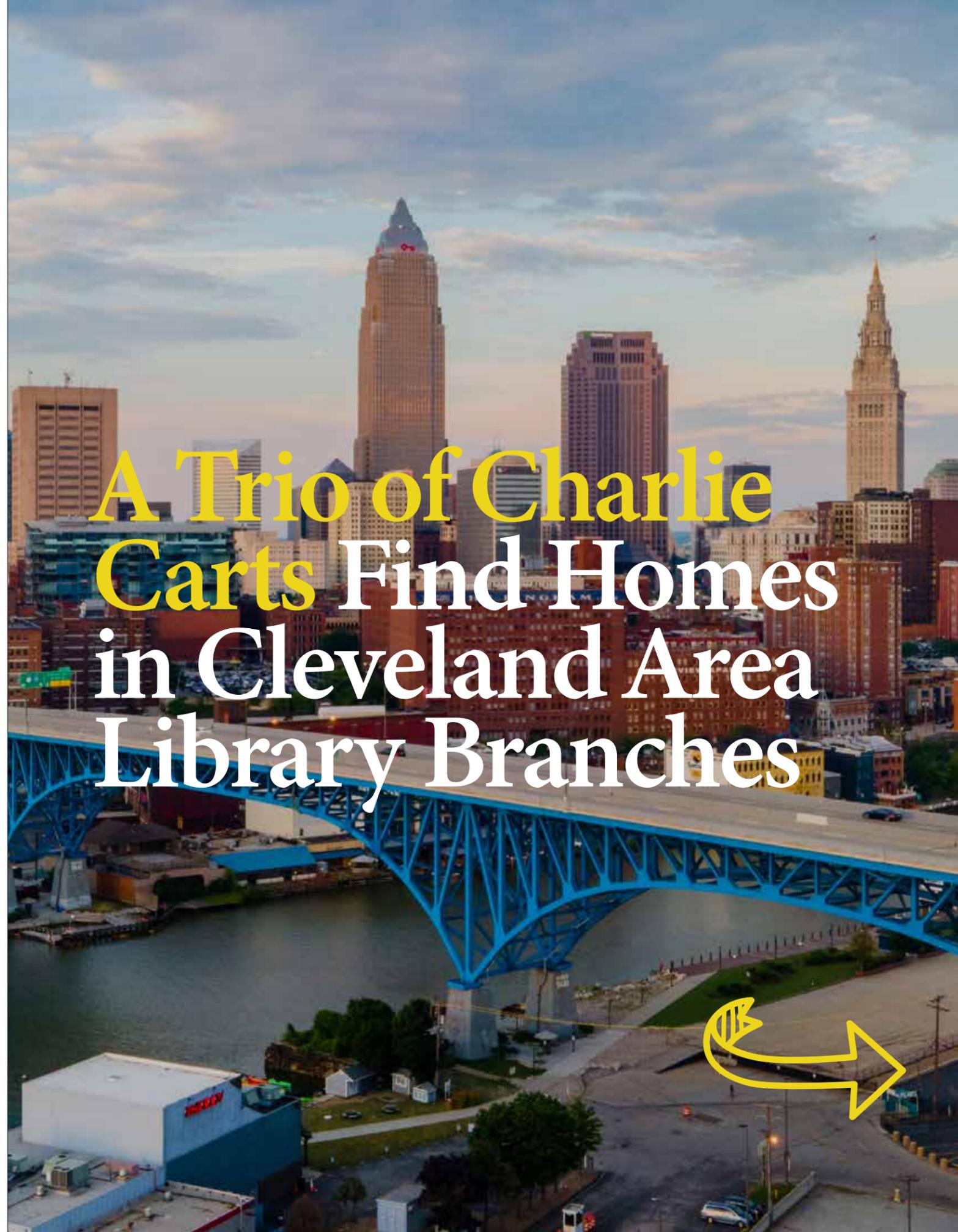
That’s when the group collectively decide they would love to see the library offer a series of classes—call it Adulting 101—for their age group. Adeeba and Johanna take note.



During training, young adult librarian Johanna Lewis looks on as Arcola Robinson and Maude Andrew work together to prepare a fresh beet and carrot salad.

Photo: Phillip Greenberg

A Trio of Charlie Carts Find Homes in Cleveland Area Library Branches



Ron Block's enthusiasm for culinary literacy programming at Cuyahoga County Public Library in Ohio is palpable. One Friday night in October 2019, Ron's introducing a dozen library staff to the Charlie Cart mobile kitchen that resides at the Middleburg Heights branch, where he serves as manager. He demos a savory tomato soup with basil oil and sweet berry lime sorbet, both dishes whipped up in a Vitamix, a high-powered blender that comes with the cart.

The assembled group lend a hand while they check out the compact, fully-stocked Charlie Cart teaching kitchen. They like how efficient the cart is; bowls, knives, kitchen tools, cutting mats, cookware—everything has its place.

It's a convivial event among colleagues, who seem impressed by the big flavors that can come from a small kitchen. Ron knows he's won over new fans. "These events, which are designed to help build support for what the Charlie Carts can do, also expose staff to a little wellness information in the process," says Ron. He first learned about the Charlie Cart when he was a librarian in Florida and the San Francisco Public Library version—Biblio Bistro—was cooking up coverage in library circles and beyond. Ron has included food-related events at his libraries for years; acquiring Charlie Carts in Cleveland has elevated cooking programming by several notches, he says, given that they come with an induction cooktop, convection oven, and electric griddle. "It's been easy to build buy-in once people get to experience the carts. I hear for

days afterwards what fun they had and how excited people are to have culinary literacy programming. The challenge is finding the time to get staff involved."

On a Saturday afternoon he pivots to an entirely different crowd. Ron co-teaches a seasonal cooking class

with Vicki Richards, head of the children's department at Middleburg Heights, a city and suburb of Cleveland. Vicki has led several Charlie Cart classes. On the menu: applesauce, with a recipe courtesy of a cookbook within the library's collection and modeled on the applesauce lesson in the Charlie Cart Curriculum. A group of eight young cooks are eager to learn, they're also really enthusiastic about a blind taste testing of different apple varieties. There is sampling involved after all. And chopping, measuring, and juicing—all tasks that are both detailed in the Charlie Cart Curriculum and covered in Charlie Cart training—to help educators like Ron and Vicki envision and manage classes with confidence. From safety concerns, shopping lists, and class prep, to enrichment activities, discussion topics, and a timed lesson plan guide, Charlie Cart users are set up for success.



At Cuyahoga County Public Library, smoothies of all types are a favorite with tweens and teens.

Photo: Cuyahoga County Library

READING AND COOKING PRODUCE AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE IN PEOPLE.

At the end of class, Ron ladles warm applesauce into jars. Class participants happily head out clutching the fruits of their labor and proudly show the adults who arrive for pick up. An apple yogurt salad dish, also from a cookbook for children that patrons can check out, garners a little less enthusiasm from the group. "After class we talked about how it makes sense to do fewer recipes and have children do more hands-on tasks," says Ron. "We learn something new each time with each group."

Another day Ron tours a visitor through the Warrensville Heights branch, which has both a Charlie Cart and an edible garden. The branch serves some of the area's neediest residents, and time with the cart and in the garden are in demand. "I like to say we're the hottest ticket in town. Customers know when we release the list for program registration," says Ron. "Within three minutes our cooking classes are full, and we have a wait list. I see so much potential for

culinary literacy in our community. Reading and cooking produce an emotional response in people."

A Moveable Feast

And the program is in its infancy. CCPL's culinary literacy program made its official debut at a kickoff event in June 2019. The program featured a Charlie Cart hosted by local chef Rocco Whalen of Fahrenheit Restaurant, who made a wild mushroom and leek dish for 300 patrons gathered at the Parma Snow Library branch auditorium. "I've always been passionate about libraries and cooking. And I firmly believe in pursuing non-traditional pathways to library programming and local partnerships to reach our community," says Ron. "The Charlie Cart is a terrific example of something that is designed with community and life-long learning in mind."

Cuyahoga County librarians have led Charlie Cart programs focused

Cuyahoga County Public Library

Where

Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL), Cleveland, Ohio

What

The Cuyahoga County Public Library system includes 27 branches in the Greater Cleveland Area, serving 47 diverse communities, and more than 620,000 residents. Beginning in 2010, for nine consecutive years the library topped the list of star libraries in the nation's largest library systems, as measured by *Library Journal*. It also earned *LJ*'s prestigious five-star rating for 11 years in a row, beginning in 2009.

How

Two private donors provided funds to buy carts for the Brooklyn and Warrensville Heights branches; a local foundation funded the Middleburg Heights cart.

Program Champions

Ron Block, manager, Middleburg Heights Branch Library

Local Partners

Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine (graduate students in Department of Nutrition and Dietetics) Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Warrensville Heights) Vitamix Corporation

on STEM learning, multicultural exploration, and health and wellness content, much of which is easily accessed from the Charlie Cart Curriculum. Programs have had a reading tie-in: At the Brooklyn branch, young children enjoyed a story time featuring *Pete the Cat's Groovy Bake Sale* followed by a fruit parfait making activity, modeled on a Charlie Cart recipe.

Meanwhile teens, at that branch have tried their hand at making almond milk and adolescent-approved snacks, such as guacamole, using recipes adapted from the Charlie Cart Curriculum. Classes have been scheduled for adult patrons, too. "We focus on simple things; we want to meet the skills of the patrons who come to these classes. We might make a healthy soup, simple salad, or fresh smoothie," says Ron, a home cook who has served as a cookbook judge for the James Beard Awards. Ron also hosts the book club series "A Cook and a Book," which features recipes and author interviews. Cookbooks, he notes, are the highest circulating book category in the library. There is a built-in audience hungry for culinary adventures.

Culinary literacy is also paired with other DIY activities at CCPL. The library has three innovation centers outfitted with a 3-D printer, laser engraver, vinyl cutter, and embroidery machine. Cooking-related projects that have incorporated these maker space tools include stencil etchings on Mason jars for pickles, laser engraving on rolling pins for holiday cookie making, and sewing kitchen towels. "These activities are a way to entice patrons and reach a wide range



Librarian Ron Block leads staff in a private lesson to get them excited about cooking at the library.

Photo: Cuyahoga County Library

of library users," says Ron. "They're another creative complement to our cooking classes."

Cooking with the Community in Mind

At the Warrensville Heights branch, located in a food desert, and ringed by public housing, the Charlie Cart is part of a two-pronged nutrition education effort. The library's edible community garden—stocked in late fall with herbs such as mint and robust greens—provides exposure to fresh produce and gardening for many residents who lack access to the outdoors. An after-school art program, in collaboration with the Center for Arts-Inspired Learning and local artist Augusto Bordelois, created vibrant murals for the garden, that is easily accessible from the

children's room. Funding for the garden and the Charlie Cart came from a charitable gift from three sisters, library patrons who have an affinity for the branch and felt that's where their donation could do the most good, says Ron.

At this branch, cooking focuses on what's available in the immediate area, as there are few places to shop for groceries, and helping patrons make healthy food choices amid scarcity. The library serves predominantly low-income African American residents, including many young single mothers. Most children who frequent the branch are eligible for free lunch, and many participate in Kids Café, a free healthy meal program provided by the Greater Cleveland Food Bank. "We are not the cherry on top," says children's branch services supervisor Megan

Barrett. "We are the resource for many residents in this community."

The bright, spacious, modern library, built in 2012, features a digital recording studio, among other draws beyond books. Both Megan and Marya Rogers, adult services supervisor at the branch, are mindful of the limited food resources patrons can access. They shop locally for ingredients that are readily available, and rely on items such as eggs, flour, and sweet potatoes, which are staples from the food bank. One-pot dishes and food that can be cooked in a microwave are ideal; some patrons live in accommodations without a kitchen. The library staff added a can opener to their essential kitchen utensil drawer after the

cart arrived. While the Charlie Cart was initially designed to introduce fresh produce to children, with the expansion into libraries and food banks, Charlie Cart training now incorporates canned foods and staples that are readily available on most food pantry shelves. This kind of adaptation, based on client feedback, is an example of how the Charlie Cart evolves depending on the demographic it serves.

Ron is exploring partnerships—with local culinary academies, university health programs, and restaurant-affiliated businesses—with an eye toward strengthening and expanding the nascent food literacy program. Charlie Cart clients receive ongoing support from Charlie Cart staff to

make these kinds of connections, both with peers around the country and with like-minded local allies in the food movement.

He'd like to continue to bolster culinary and nutrition training of library employees. And, he'd like to see the program develop consistency, goals, and focus. "We have library staff who want to dive right in, but maybe they want to make pasta and cookies—and it's great to have that enthusiasm—but we also want to focus on healthy food choices," says Ron. "And then there are some library staff who maybe don't have a background with food or home cooking who are afraid to fail, or they don't want to be up demo-ing in front of people. They might be fine doing

OUR LIBRARIANS ARE CONSTANTLY THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO INCORPORATE COOKING INTO THE SCHEDULE.

story time with children, but this is a different ask, so we need to instill confidence in our staff and that comes through training, exposure, and practice,” he says. “In an ideal world, we’d have a team of people who are adept at using the Charlie Cart who can move between branches and lead classes and train other staff”

He’d also like the library to survey patrons to see what kitchen skills they’re interested in learning. He initiated a series of gluten-free classes, for instance, that was well attended. “We try to strike a balance: some of our events are demos where we teach a concept, talk about it, and taste test, so it’s more educational,” he says. “Our hands-on cooking classes are the most popular.”

The library is in the process of developing standards for each age group—children, teen/young adult, and adult—around frequency of programming. Prior to 2020, the goal was for each branch to offer three programs or more per month for each age group. “We’re seeing both the need and desire from our customers to continue and expand culinary programming. And we see it as a collaborative effort. We need to balance the demands library staff have on their time for other programming. We’re open to the classes being led by people from the wider community, such as a local chef or nutrition educator.”

Ron has big dreams: He’d like to play a role in building a vibrant, long-term, sustainable culinary literacy program across the library system. On his wish list: a sensory, edible

garden, with an emphasis on providing programming for the autistic community. He’d like to replicate a program begun at the Philadelphia Free Library Culinary Literacy Center called Edible Alphabet, where a food professional and a language professional teach English as a second language through cooking. And he would like to formally partner with the food bank to offer on-going programming geared towards food pantry recipients.

“We’re at the point where we’ve gotten staff to see culinary literacy as part of routine programming that is beneficial to our community’s well-being. Our librarians are constantly thinking about ways to incorporate cooking into the schedule,” says Ron, who says about 30 percent of his time prior to the pandemic was dedicated to such efforts.

Culinary literacy at Cuyahoga County

Public Library is just getting started. Plans for 2022 and beyond are still taking shape. There’s even talk of raising the funds and garnering community support to build a culinary kitchen within the system. Stay tuned.



Librarian Ron Block; Kenny Crumpton, Fox 8 reporter; and Rocco Whalen, restaurateur and CCPL culinary literacy ambassador; record a cooking demonstration to reach a wider audience.

Photo: Ron Block

One Southeastern State, Two Library Systems, Four Charlie Carts & Counting



Lowcountry Food Bank’s nutrition initiatives director Dana Mitchel needed no convincing of the merits of a mobile kitchen to reach food bank families—including in isolated rural areas—to preach the gospel of fresh fruits and vegetables and home cooking. What if she could serve up roasted sweet potatoes straight from the oven, or a pot of well-seasoned black beans simmered in a rustic tomato sauce, or a refreshing peach agua fresca?

She knew such items would draw a crowd and tempt taste buds. “Our goal is to empower people to create these delicious and nutritious foods for themselves and their families,” she says.

That’s how in 2016, after a Google search to find a portable kitchen classroom, the Lowcountry Food Bank became the first hunger relief organization to purchase a Charlie Cart. Mitchel—delighted by the equipment and tools housed inside the small kitchen—put the cart on a trailer, hitched it to a van, and personally drove around the region demonstrating how to cook healthy, affordable food in a compact kitchen. The cart went to schools, health and wellness fairs, food bank mobile farmers markets, afterschool and summer feeding sites, and became incorporated into educational events at the food bank. Over a two-month stretch, three days a week, Dana cooked from the cart, and hundreds of people sampled what she prepared. “Whatever we made—sauces, smoothies, salsa—it was a hit,” says Dana. The food bank, which works closely with local farmers, is always looking for innovative ways to enhance fresh produce consumption among its

clients. The Charlie Cart proved an ideal vehicle to meet that goal, and being able to serve up hot food was key to engaging residents, says Dana.

That first cart, an early prototype, logged a lot of travel time and is mostly a permanent fixture at the food bank now. When the food bank acquired a second cart in 2018, Mitchel already knew that she wanted



Hands-on projects give students a welcome break from desk learning, and, more recently, screen time.

Photo: Marianna Nobre

to partner with the Charleston County Public Library to reach a wider audience for the portable classroom 2.0. It was a win-win, since Charleston librarians were eager to find ways to bolster their hands-on food literacy programs.

In the summer of 2019, the two organizations piloted a three-week series of Charlie Cart programs at three Charleston County library locations. Some classes drew as many as 40 participants. The programs were so well received—and the food-bank-branded cart is in such demand—that it is typically booked by branches months ahead. The program’s goal—short, sweet, simple—is inked onto the cart: Nutrition Education: Eat Well. Be Well.

**WHATEVER WE
MADE—SAUCES,
SMOOTHIES, SALSA
—IT WAS A HIT!**

Fun with Fruit and Vegetables

In the fall of 2019, at the Cynthia Graham Hurd/St. Andrew’s Regional Library, signs of food literacy programming are dotted throughout the modern, spacious branch. Flyers announcing upcoming Charlie Cart classes are conveniently placed at the check-out desk. A poster detailing an Israeli cuisine tasting, hosted by the Charleston Jewish Federation and featuring healthy vegan recipes, is near the entrance. There’s a desk display promoting health literacy month events; it also showcases a range of cookbooks, including books on nutrition for people with diabetes, kosher cooking, and vegan meals.

In a large meeting room, library staff Jackie Peters and Devon Andrews are prepping for an afterschool class for young children. It’s a small but attentive group, except for the boy having a tantrum in the back, which everyone seems able to ignore. His

mom sits with her young daughter. Also in the room: two sisters and their mother, a couple of teen friends, and two girls who have seen each other before at library programs. One child walks in, eyeballs the recipe, and says to nobody in particular: “Oh, yummy, Brussels sprouts.” (To be fair, another patron pokes his head in, sees that cruciferous vegetables are on the menu, and opts not to join in. You win some, you lose some.)

The recipe of the day is Roasted Winter Garden—from the Charlie Cart Curriculum—starring cauliflower, broccoli, and, yes, Brussels sprouts. Children learn along the way that roasting brings out the sweetness in these vegetables, lemon adds acidity, and bread crumbs provide textural crunch. The children enjoy stripping the sprouts of their leaves and tearing bread into little pieces. The stocked cart comes with tools such as a microplane (for lemon zest) and a citrus reamer (for

Charleston County Public Library and South Carolina State Library

Where

Charleston County Public Library, Charleston, South Carolina (Partnership with the Lowcountry Food Bank, Charleston)
South Carolina State Library, Columbia, South Carolina

What

Charleston County Public Library has 17 branches with more under construction; more than half featured Charlie Cart programming as part of the first year of collaboration with the food bank in 2019.

The South Carolina State Library serves as a central resource for the 43 public library systems around the state. The state library’s Charlie Carts are loaned out to member libraries for six to eight weeks at a time as part of its Read, Eat, Grow initiative.

Lowcountry Food Bank is a nonprofit that distributes donated food to a network of nearly 300 member agencies throughout 10 coastal counties in South Carolina. It serves around 200,000 families each year. The food bank was the first hunger relief organization to purchase a Charlie Cart.

How

South Carolina State Library (SCSL): Federal funding through the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM)

SCSL’s food education work was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)

Program Champions

Darcy Coover, young adult programming coordinator, Charleston County Public Library
Rebecca Antill, youth services consultant, South Carolina State Library
Dana Mitchel, director nutrition initiatives, Lowcountry Food Bank

Local Partners

South Carolina State Library Read, Eat Grow Partners:
Lowcountry Food Bank
Clemson Youth Institute
Department of Health and Environmental Control
Department of Education
State Farm Bureau

juicing) that are new, and pretty exciting, to these attendees. Their lesson adheres closely to the Charlie Cart Curriculum Guide: There's a discussion about the vegetables belonging to the brassica family and what that means. And, while the vegetables roast, there's an activity sheet—a lesson in determining whether a vegetable is a root, leaf, fruit, seed, or flower. Younger children draw, the teens gossip, and when the dish is ready everybody digs in. The caramelized vegetables get a thumbs up from all participants, who peel off as their rides arrive to go home. "That was a pretty typical class; it's a beautiful thing to watch those children work in teams of two and enjoy eating what they made," says Dana.

"Our surveys show that our patrons love culinary programming," says Darcy Coover, young adult programming coordinator at the Charleston County Public Library. "We find with all age groups that cooking classes help patrons feel

more comfortable about trying things in their own kitchens." That's true for librarians too. "Training is key," says Darcy. "We have library staff who would not have felt equipped to lead these activities without some familiarity with the cart, curriculum, and recipes," adds Darcy, who received training along with other library staff from the Charlie Cart team. "We want to put people—both librarians and patrons—at ease, by taking away any apprehension about cooking." As part of training, library staff also take part in online food safety handling certification.

Anecdotally, Darcy, Dana and company know the program is popular, but does it bring about behavior changes? That's something the food bank wants to evaluate. Does exposure to the Charlie Cart impact how people eat, shop, and cook? Currently, with support from the Charlie Cart Project team, the food bank is in discussions about collaborating with researchers to gather exactly this kind of data.

"We know from other cooking programming that these kinds of initiatives do have an impact and create behavioral change," says Dana. "We want to gather that evidence and incorporate what we learn into our curriculum."

The libraries and food bank adapt Charlie Cart recipes for their local residents and use ingredients that are readily available to home cooks. If a dish sounds unfamiliar—say, agua fresca, panzanella, or tamalitos—Dana finds clients a little less likely to respond to a recipe and make it. But she's learned to adapt—for example, she explains agua fresca is a delicious fruit drink under a different name. In the South, lemonade and iced tea are more familiar drinks. The food bank also looks for recipes that use fresh ingredients that can be hard to move, such as butternut squash, eggplant, and some greens. As with many modern feeding programs, the Lowcountry Food Bank offers farmers-market style service where customers can pick and choose which

items to take home. "If they sample something hot that's tasty, using an ingredient that they would normally ignore, they're more likely to take it home," Dana says.

In addition to libraries and schools, the food bank would like to take the Charlie Cart to senior centers and healthcare settings. "I think our biggest limitation is having confident, trained educators. Not all librarians are comfortable teaching cooking or are even home cooks themselves," says Dana. "I'd love to do more training, and I'd like to work with more culinary partners on programming." Given the need within the community she serves, Dana sees a healthy future for Charlie Cart programming in Charleston.

Chocolate Zucchini Muffins Star at Librarian Meet-up

The Lowcountry Food Bank is not the only South Carolina organization that loans out its Charlie Cart to libraries in the state.

The South Carolina State Library, whose mission is to serve as a resource for public libraries around the state—think of the organization as the library's library—is also actively championing culinary literacy to its membership.

At a Marriott Hotel in downtown Columbia, a librarian convention is in full swing on a 2019 fall day. It's easy to find the meeting room where the Charlie Cart is being introduced: the scent of muffins baking gives it away. Inside, Rebecca Antill, youth services consultant with the South Carolina State Library,



Story time and snack time go hand-in-hand at South Carolina State Library, even online.

Photo: South Carolina State Library

is in the middle of a demo in front of about two dozen librarian staff from around the state. Rebecca is a veteran convention speaker. She knows how to keep a crowd engaged. And she's doing exactly that while also baking chocolate zucchini muffins—made especially moist with the addition of yogurt—in the Charlie Cart's convection oven. And, yes, reusable, BPA-free silicone baking cups come with the cart. Of course, there is taste testing involved. Rebecca admits with a shrug and a smile that she accidentally left out the baking soda in one batch—multi-tasking and all. No matter, that round of baked goods may not have risen much but they're snapped up in minutes. "These demos show our library members—most of whom haven't seen the cart in action—that you don't need a big commercial kitchen to bring food literacy to your library,"

says Rebecca. "And that even when you make a mistake, it's okay."

Antill talks up a new statewide initiative called South Carolina Read, Eat, Grow, which provides training and resources for 43 public library systems, including Charleston County Public Library, as part of a fresh perspective on food literacy, nutrition education, and culinary programming. The state library's two Charlie Carts are a key part of that effort, as are kitchen-in-a-box-kits, and a growing program dubbed SC Plants the Seeds. The initiative kicked off in the fall of 2019 at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center, where around 125 library staff and educators gathered to learn about culinary literacy. Two keynote speakers took to the stage: Children's book author and illustrator Lizzy Rockwell (*Plants Feed Me*), and

EVEN WHEN YOU
MAKE A MISTAKE
THAT'S OK.

Edward Lee, the Southern celebrity chef who road tripped around the country in search of home cooking for *Buttermilk Graffiti*. Lee made a healthy, contemporary ambrosia salad, that Southern staple known for canned fruit and Cool Whip, using the Charlie Cart as his kitchen and fresh fruit and creamy yogurt as ingredients. The dish went over well with the crowd.

Since libraries are community hubs or cornerstones for many residents, bringing nutrition programming to patrons feels like a natural fit, says Rebecca, who is from a large family in Ohio and grew up homeschooled on a dairy farm. She was raised with the belief that the library could fulfill everything the family couldn't afford: computers, movies, and all the books she could ever want to read.

With concerns like hunger, food insecurity, and obesity widespread around the state, there is a pressing need for services that address basic needs and provide information, resources, and education for people to make healthy choices, she says. "Well-fed, well-nourished children and adults are able to function better, which only increases their ability to learn and thrive."

Rebecca has encountered skeptics before, those who believe that food has no place in a library and that culinary programming is outside the scope of a library's core mission. She politely, but firmly, disagrees. "We need to think beyond the traditional role that libraries have played. Through food programming, cookbook clubs, and chef author events, we can develop life skills,

tap into cultural foodways, explore history, make STEM connections, and have fun doing it all," she says. The Charlie Cart Curriculum offers class instructors myriad ways to make just these kinds of connections in an accessible and engaging way, says Rebecca. "Libraries need to, can, and have adapted to meet the needs of their community. We are a trusted resource and people want this kind of programming." The state library's initiative has plenty of supporters. Its Charlie Carts, which have already been introduced to hundreds of participants, are spoken for at libraries around the state for the next year.

The state library has also received funding from the Network of National Libraries of Medicine to pursue additional health literacy programming that will encourage families to make small shifts in their cooking and eating habits.

Anecdotally, Rebecca says she's already seen behavioral change by both library users and staff. She says participants are delighted, for instance, to discover that that ubiquitous summer crop—zucchini—can be repurposed into thin noodle strips and that sweet potato can make a delicious taco filling. She uses the Charlie Cart recipes—citing Hummus Two Ways, Three Sisters Sauté, and Johnnycakes (flat, corn-based bread) as frequent go-tos. She supplements those with online recipe resources such as Cooking Matters and Good and Cheap. "We want to take the data we collect and gather the stories of the impact this programming has on people, so we can clearly demonstrate the reasons why food literacy is an important, necessary, and growing part of what we do for our communities."

FOOD LITERACY IS AN
IMPORTANT, NECESSARY,
AND GROWING PART OF
WHAT WE DO FOR OUR
COMMUNITIES.



Kids gain confidence and joy through hands-on cooking.

Photo: Mackensy Alexander

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