

THE **CHARLIE CART** PROJECT

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

Charlie Carts
Power Community
Food Education



THREE
NEW SUCCESS
STORIES

Charlie Carts Power Community Food Education

Across the United States, communities face increasing diet-related health problems, often exacerbated by a lack of access to fresh food and knowledge about how to select, prepare, and cook it. For many, isolation and loneliness also play a major role in health disparities. Cooking classes have emerged as an innovative and effective approach to improve overall well-being, but cost and know-how can be prohibitive to launching a hands-on food education program.

Enter the Charlie Cart. These compact teaching kitchens on wheels have found homes in a wide range of organizations around the country, from after-school programs to hospitals to food pantries to farmers markets. In each of these settings the carts become a trusted local touchpoint where children and/or adults receive information and support—and discover how to make dishes they can readily replicate at home.



Charlie Cart cooking classes might look slightly different depending on where they take place and who participates, but they share a common goal: The lessons meet people where they're at vis a vis cooking skills, confidence in the kitchen, and access to affordable ingredients. Charlie Cart lessons are also customizable: A hospital might focus on preventive health; a food bank might emphasize how to use items found at the pantry; a Boys & Girls Club might focus on life skills development. Preparing and sharing fresh food offers a source of comfort and connection.

The programs profiled here—a social services nonprofit; a food pantry partnered with a health center and a school district; and an after-school club—demonstrate how a range of community groups integrate food

education to strengthen the health and well-being of the people they serve. The primary audiences for these classes might be children, adults, or families, each with their own unique needs; each using our mobile kitchen and tools as part of a larger effort to nurture healthier, more resilient communities.

Charlie Carts create a pathway for people to engage through food, offering a unifying, low-barrier way to improve health through practical, experiential learning. Children and adults also strengthen community ties while working hands-on in collaboration with neighbors, friends, classmates, or strangers. Class participants learn how to nourish themselves and their families. And everybody gets to eat.

Educators who teach with Charlie Carts describe measurable impact. Children and adults alike ask for recipes to take home, try new foods, and share that they are no longer intimidated by unfamiliar ingredients. These champions for change make a difference in people's quality of life and well-being—one cooking class at a time.

Charlie Carts in Community: A Snapshot

672 Charlie Carts

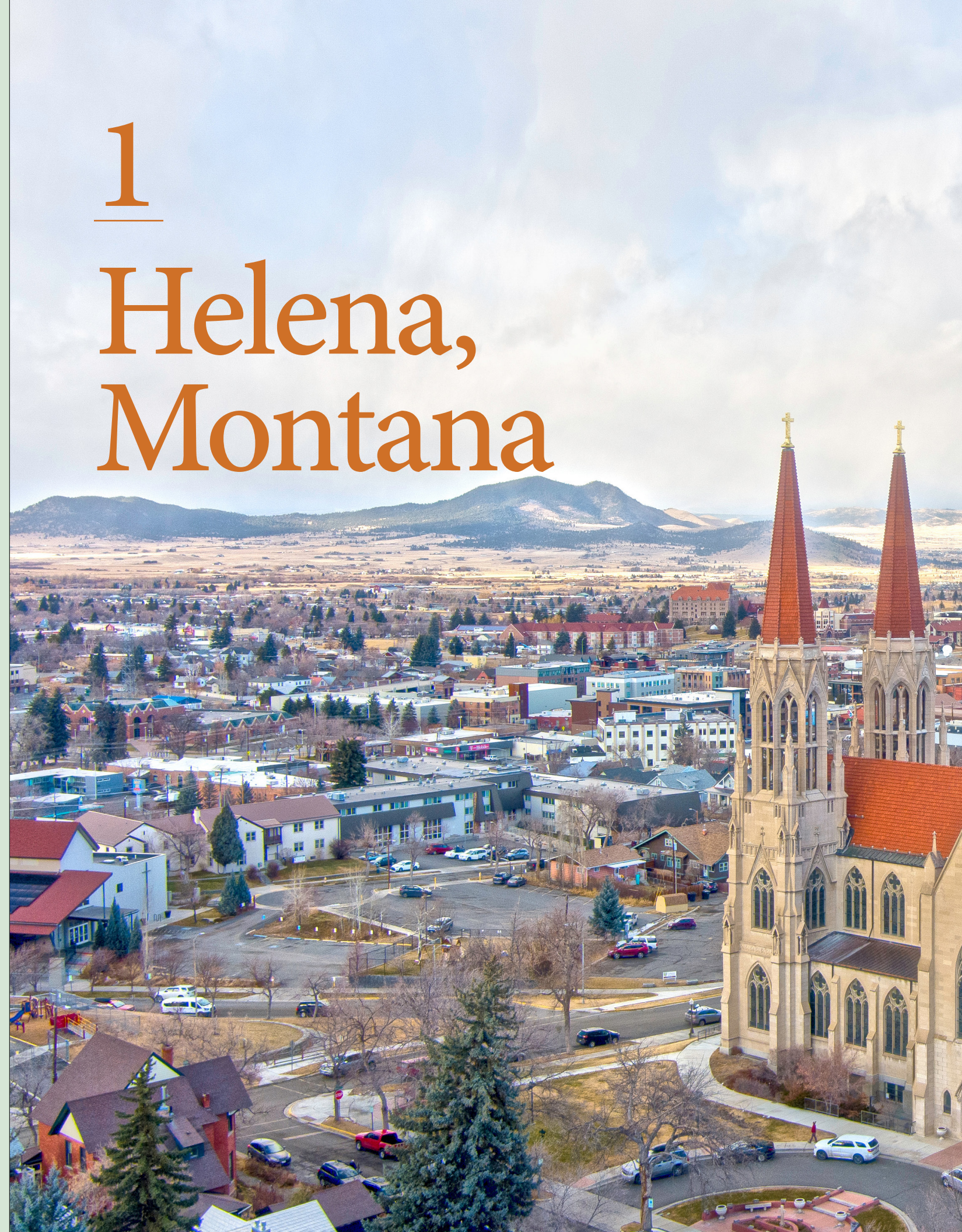
515 communities

48 states

Charlie Carts Pop Up Everywhere.
Find them in your local:

- Foodbanks and Pantries
- Hospitals, Clinics, and VA Centers
- Public and Private Libraries
- Museums and Botanical Gardens
- Tribal Organizations
- K-12 Schools and After-School Programs
- Universities and Colleges
- Religious Settings
- Government Offices, including the
USDA and the NIH

1 Helena, Montana



In Montana, a Food Bank, Hospital, and School District Bring Food Education to All

Spice-infused lentil nachos, crunchy kale chips, and hot pink beet pancakes. These are among the most popular dishes that Kim Lloyd shares with elementary school children in Helena, Montana, as part of her mobile kitchen classroom.

Lloyd, who teaches from a Charlie Cart purchased by a local food pantry, cooks up a ton of fun at 10 schools in the area. Employed by a Helena health care organization, Lloyd runs about 250 Charlie Cart classes a year teaching around 2,500 students. She has 30 minutes to pass along a couple of key nutrition education messages, get kids engaged in making a recipe, and have children sample what they’ve made before she greets the next set of eager young cooks.

The novelty of the cart is welcome. “We have a spread-out community,” says Lloyd, “and beyond town there’s not a lot of grocery stores. Students might get their meals from a convenience store or fast-food outlet.”

There are a lot of firsts. “I’ve had students tell me they don’t get to smell food cooking at home,” she says. “This is an opportunity for them to see, smell, and taste something made from scratch. For some students, when we make beet pancakes it’s their first time cracking an egg.”

Lloyd spends a week in each school. She parks the cart in a convenient



location on campus and students come to her. She’s all about pre-class prep to make every minute of instruction count. This nutrition advocate has streamlined her lesson plans and has her spiel and systems down pat. She sings the health benefits of a particular produce or protein, demonstrates a culinary skill or two, and encourages kids to cook at home. “Since I come from health care, I tell students that I’m trying to keep them

out of the hospital,” she says, “and that food can be medicine.” Lloyd is the Harvest of the Month community coordinator for the local nonprofit medical center St. Peter’s Health. As part of that role she teaches monthly nutrition classes to 4th-grade students; Lloyd brings prepared food for those lessons.

On the Charlie Cart, she works with students from kindergarten through 5th grade. Each child attends at least one class a year; those who sign up for summer school programming and summer camps get to use the cart more.

Children always ask for the recipe. “I love it when students come and share that what they made on the Charlie Cart, they also made at home,” says Lloyd, who hears from parents whose children will try foods in school they won’t try at home. “I had a mom stop me the other day and say: ‘My kid will not touch lentils. I’ve served them to him many times, he won’t eat them. But he ate them on



the Charlie Cart at school, then came home and started requesting them.”

Lloyd can relate: She has a child who declines certain foods at home. “I tell other parents. They know I’m not a magician,” she says. “It’s just the hands-on experience in school with their peers. They’re in a setting with these fun, colorful tools, and they see their friends trying a dish, so they’re going to try it too. And they often make the recipe again and are pretty proud of it.”

A trifecta of community care

In the three years Lloyd has been rolling into Helena schools, she’s made it a priority to cook with local, seasonal ingredients. She also works with items that can frequently be found at the pantry, Helena Food Share, which has a big box truck for collecting fresh produce and shelf-stable foods from grocery stores. It’s also ideal for transporting the Charlie Cart to schools.

Montana may be a bison and beef state but it’s also a top producer of lentils and chickpeas, significant sources of lean, plant-based protein. Although it has a short growing season, Big Sky Country is well suited to growing brassicas such as kale, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts—cold-weather crops rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

Lloyd normalizes going to the food pantry. “It’s like shopping at the grocery store but everything is free,” she tells her students. The Charlie Cart features the Helena Food Share logo prominently on the front, so it’s a natural talking point. She says with young children there is no stigma attached to shopping at the pantry and some students volunteer that they shop there.

Her recipes feature inexpensive and easily available ingredients, including lots of fruits and vegetables. One favorite recipe from the Charlie Cart Project curriculum is Moroccan Carrot Salad. She also works with pantry staples like frozen corn

kernels, jarred tomato sauce, and canned salmon. Lloyd keeps it simple: She now makes the same recipe with every grade at each school. Given the tight schedule, it’s the most efficient way to manage her teaching time. It’s also the most economical approach, since she can buy groceries in bulk. “I’m able to feed a school for \$100, especially doing a recipe with lentils,” she says.

“With planning, you can keep cooking low-cost.” Three out of the 10 schools she brings the cart to are Title I schools, meaning more than half the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, so Lloyd keeps the economics of eating front of mind.

Even something as simple as applesauce is memorable when kids get to cook it themselves, she says. She makes sure every student in class has a job: whether it’s peeling the skin off chickpeas, picking the leaves off Brussels sprouts, measuring dry ingredients, cutting onions, slicing ginger, squeezing limes, or grinding spices and nuts with a mortar and pestle. If any ingredients—such as lentils—take a bit more time to cook, she prepares them at home and brings them to the lesson ready to be incorporated into the dish.

Lloyd has worked as a nutrition educator for almost 10 years, about five of those with the hospital. She jokes that working with the Charlie Cart has made her “really famous—albeit small-town famous,” she concedes with a laugh. But her hands-on classes are such a hit that everyone in town seems to know who she is. Kids routinely greet the *Charlie Cart Lady*—as they call her—as she goes about her business in this close-knit rural community.



Carts come back to school by popular demand

Lloyd first started using the cart at the food pantry, featuring abundant or less-familiar ingredients—beets, lentils, salmon—that customers didn't know how to cook. She'd do a tasting and hand out recipes. The idea was to give shoppers a little sustenance and some kitchen inspiration while they shopped.

Since 2018, the cart has been part of the food pantry's programming, courtesy of a city grant. Helena Food Share sees about 150 households a day, says Jonathan Hockett, pantry nutrition program coordinator, who has used the cart to demo recipes. Times are tough: A record day at the pantry saw well over 300 families walk through its doors, he says.

The cart offers a welcoming way to put pantry customers at ease. "We want to have a friendly, inviting atmosphere where people feel safe

and comfortable, get something to eat, and have fun," Hockett says. Shoppers appreciate the samples. "Lentil cookies are a surprisingly big hit and beet hummus is popular," he says. "Who doesn't like a dip?"

Local professional chef Margaret Corcoran is a regular volunteer. "She uses every possible appliance on the cart," says Hockett. "She'll be blending, mixing, roasting all in one demo." The pantry holds events in its produce garden and features the cart in interactive activities, such as making fresh spring rolls.

Corcoran is usually behind the cart at a pantry event in partnership with the library. Librarians bring a book cart to the event, which features a spice of the month and an accompanying recipe. She is savvy about adapting recipes depending on what ingredients are on hand, says Hockett, who recalls her making pesto with basil, sage, cilantro, or mint as the main attraction.

Cooking with surplus ingredients is a skill the pantry crew pass along to customers. Hockett says Helena Food

Share's garden grew an abundance of salad turnips in summer. They started to stack up. "We demoed what to do with them on the cart, offered customers a taste, and then they all disappeared," he says. "When people try something new it's no longer intimidating."

Lloyd's students who come to the pantry ask for the ingredients to make lentil nachos and beet pancakes. The cart has won over adults and children alike. "Nutrition is an abstract concept," Helena elementary school principal Tia Wilkins told Food Share. "Getting to learn about, prepare, and taste healthy food makes it concrete, something students can begin to relate to."

The cart serves a common goal for the pantry, hospital, and schools. "I often ask: 'How many students tried a new food today?' and I would say 90% of the kids raise their hands," says Lloyd.

That's not all. "The best feedback is when schools sign up to have me back again the next year," she says. "And *all* the schools sign up to have me back."



2 Southern Lorain County, Ohio



Ohio Social Services Organization Brings Cooking Education to Young and Old

Libby Showalter is a registered dietitian with more than 30 years of experience helping clients with nutrition-related health issues. Showalter works in Southern Lorain County in Ohio, in the Northeast of the state (part of the Greater Cleveland area) known for its rural townships, villages, and suburbs. She has held positions in hospital, nonprofit, and community settings, including in her current role as a dietician for the region’s YMCA.

Showalter also brings her nutrition education chops to THRIVE! Southern Lorain County, a health-focused community collaborative dedicated to reducing the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity among area residents.

Launched in 2016, THRIVE! Southern Lorain County is a project of United Way of Greater Lorain County and its partners include local health and social service agencies, churches, and other community-based groups.

In early 2025, with the help of a grant, Lorain County Office on Aging—a THRIVE! partner—purchased the Charlie Cart Showalter uses to teach both young and old the joy of cooking. She stores the cart at the Wellington location of Lorain County Community College, another THRIVE! partner, where she holds most of her classes.

THRIVE! offers a range of health campaigns to benefit local residents. In the past it has provided elevated garden boxes and starter plants so people with physical challenges can grow fresh food. And the collaborative has distributed holiday food boxes, complete with recipes courtesy of Showalter, for residents in need. So the Charlie Cart is a natural fit for its wellness programming.

Showalter received culinary training as part of her nutrition degree and is an avid home cook. In her professional life she has developed dozens of healthy and budget-friendly recipes for residents in the area, including those who frequent food pantries and community gardens. She also develops recipes for her Charlie Cart clients.

Showalter began using the cart in May 2025 and teaches classes to children, adults, and seniors.

Regardless of age, Showalter says class participants “have fun with experiencing the meal prep process and love to take some of the food home so they can share it with their families.”

Recipes clients can relate to—and afford

THRIVE! works within low-income communities where there is a high incidence of nutrition-related disorders such as obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes. The county also has pockets of so-called food deserts, areas where there is little access to fresh food or even a grocery store.

Helping clients make smart food choices and sharing recipes that feature nutritious, affordable ingredients that clients can find easily is a top consideration for Showalter.

As part of her job Showalter teaches nutrition education classes. The Charlie Cart serves as a terrific teaching tool, she says, bringing the information she’s sharing with clients to life for her students in tangible, practical ways.

Showalter positions a screen behind the cart to project nutrition education slides, which she says serve to reinforce the hands-on cooking lessons with instruction on food safety and kitchen skills. This two-pronged approach to teaching is a win-win for her clients, says Showalter.



Her Charlie Cart classes have proven popular, she says. Showalter teaches classes to three distinct demographics: adults, children ages 8 to 12 accompanied by an adult, and senior citizens.

“I encourage the participants to share their own experiences and we all learn from each other,” she says. “I make the class very interactive; it’s not just me talking and the clients listening,” Showalter says. Preparing a meal is a social activity—for young and old alike.

The classes are about more than nutrition. Showalter says that in the time she’s worked with the cart she’s found that participants enjoy getting to know each other and friendships develop while participants are chopping vegetables or stirring ingredients.

All of her recipes are designed to be budget-friendly, simple, and accessible, which her clients appreciate. She’s taught classes on

making warming winter soups and cooking healthy holiday fare, as well as lessons on creating wholesome snacks and preparing fruity mocktails.

“I want the clients to be able to make these recipes at home with their families,” she says. “I always send copies of the recipes home with them.”

Working with clients where they are

Sometimes dietitians have a reputation for being rigid about what their clients eat, according to Showalter. Over the years she’s encountered that concern from the clients that she serves. But that’s not her approach. She says that kind of mind-set typically backfires with most people.

“As a dietician, my clients often assume that I am going to be very strict and set goals around ‘perfect’



diets, with no ‘cheating’ and that clients should all have an ‘ideal’ body weight,” she says. “This is unrealistic and typically does not work long term.”

Instead, she emphasizes that small changes in diet and lifestyle can make a big difference. “I don’t judge and I encourage any accomplishments,” Showalter says. For example, she suggests clients cook with their families at home, since meals prepared at home are typically healthier and cost less than eating out. It’s this kind of support around healthful eating that she weaves into her lessons, including with her Charlie Cart clients.

Similarly she recommends parents think less about children eating “perfectly” and more about a balanced diet. “I tell parents to encourage their children to try a variety of foods.” That’s sound advice for any eater—from young children to senior citizens.

She creates a calm, clean, and clear space in which she demonstrates making a dish. Her goal is to encourage confidence and competence and dispel any fear or mystery about working with a recipe or preparing a meal.

“Cooking can be intimidating,” she says. “I try to have clients with any level of culinary skills feel empowered in the kitchen.” The Charlie Cart’s tools and equipment are designed to be approachable for those new to cooking as well as those who already know how to use kitchen knives.

It’s also important, she says, to work with cooking class participants where they are at. “A lot of our clients do not feel comfortable preparing even basic meals,” she says. “The hands-on

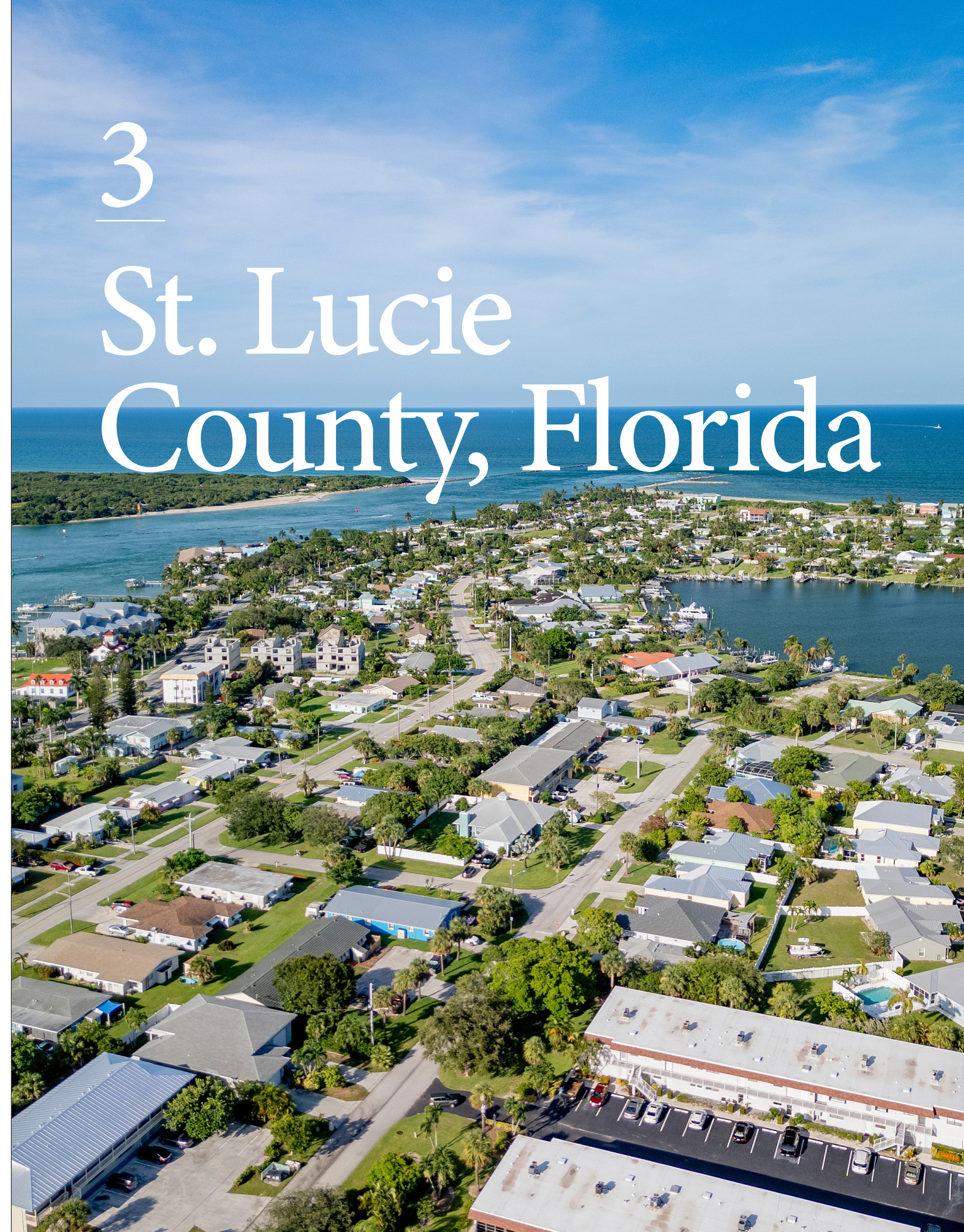
cooking helps them feel more confident with preparing meals at home.”

Even very young children, she points out, can help in the kitchen by doing tasks such as assisting with grocery shopping, mixing ingredients, and setting the table.

Showalter promotes the merits of families preparing meals together. Cooking together, she tells her clients, should be a source of fun, not a chore. She emphasizes the value of building healthy eating habits together.

When possible, she sends the clients home with some of the food prepared together in class. This way, other family members get to taste the recipe and Showalter hopes it motivates the family to prepare the recipe together at home too.

“It’s fun to see clients of all ages be excited about preparing homemade meals,” says Showalter. “We always hope that the different generations can learn from each other and encourage each other to prepare more meals at home.”



Florida Boys & Girls Clubs Teach Tamales & Teamwork

When preparing a batch of tamales, teamwork makes the dream work. And collaborative cooking via the Charlie Cart is how tamales happen at the Chuck Hill Clubhouse in Port St. Lucie, a neighborhood-based site of the Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Lucie County in Florida. Also on the menu: club teenagers sharing culture, language, and mentoring younger clubhouse members.

For the tamales cooking class, part of Hispanic Heritage Month activities at the club, three teens stepped into the role of educators, guiding youth in grades kindergarten to 6th grade through all things tamale. The youth share the origins of this traditional Mexican recipe, whose roots date back to indigenous Mayan, Aztec, and Olmec cultures.

A tamale starts with masa (a corn-based, lime-treated dough), the adolescents explain. Then it’s filled with cheese, meat, and vegetables, wrapped in a corn husk, and finally steamed. Tamales are a simple yet labor-intensive undertaking with plenty of jobs for all comers. The teen trio demonstrate the process of assembling each tamale and then the younger students follow suit. It turns out that the proverb *many hands make light work* is true when it comes to getting tamales on the table.

The cooking class is enriched by Spanish language instruction with

vocabulary from reading the story “Too Many Tamales” by Gary Soto. It’s a humorous holiday tale about a girl who thinks she lost her mother’s diamond ring while making tamales; she and her cousins try to eat their way out of trouble and bond over the misadventure.

This is an example of how to integrate literature, language, and culinary arts into a meaningful after-school activity, says Rene Motto, vice president of programming for the Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Lucie County, located on the Atlantic Ocean between Miami and Orlando in what’s known as the Treasure Coast.

During the cooking lesson club members also practice taking turns on a group activity, learn about kitchen safety, use new culinary skills, and eat the product of their labor.

For many of the young members, it’s also their first time trying tamales, a popular street food and a favorite

at family gatherings. Tamales also feature at special occasions and holiday festivities including *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) and *Navidad* (Christmas). Thumbs up (the universal language for: *this is tasty!*) abound at the clubhouse after the first bite.

Come for the cooking, stay for the connection

Children are drawn to the Charlie Cart for the opportunity to cook. But they stay for the connections, says Motto, who spent 17 years in the local school district as a teacher, instructional coach, and administrator. Cooking lessons and recipes explore subjects beyond food.

Children apply math skills to measure, estimate, and convert, says Motto, and practice reading and comprehension skills with recipes. Instructors also integrate cultural studies content (geography, history, and traditions) and apply science concepts such as plant life cycles. In addition, members learn to work together, plan, and budget.

At the club the cart is a vehicle not just for cooking; the mobile kitchen allows youth to explore, collaborate, and create. The Charlie Cart also helps to build confidence, cultural awareness, and leadership skills. When teens step up and take the initiative to teach younger members,



they’re practicing the kind of mentorship and community building that will serve them for life, says Motto.

The Boys & Girls Clubs after-school programming for youth includes a variety of experiences to support academic success, workforce readiness (through culinary exposures and opportunities to prepare for food service certifications), and help members tap into their gifts and talents, adds Motto. The goal is to create a warm and safe space and nurture the holistic development of the next generation, she says, while helping members develop trusting relationships.

At Chuck Hill, the Charlie Cart rolls out twice a week. Typically the classes are led by program specialists, teen directors, or certified teachers, who use the Charlie Cart curriculum for ideas.

Teenagers alternate between making savory and sweet recipes. Sometimes cooking class ideas come from

unexpected places. For example, at one club a literacy link to “Green Eggs and Ham” had members opting to cook breakfast for dinner because why not?

Partnerships help make cooking classes sustainable

The Charlie Cart programming at the Chuck Hill Clubhouse is made possible because of partnerships. This clubhouse purchased its cart through a Publix Charities grant (the philanthropic arm of the supermarket chain). The grantor also funded a cart at a second club location. The local Sprouts Farmers Market and Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation provide the ingredients that make this cooking and cultural exploration possible, bringing hands-on learning to life.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Lucie County has six Charlie Carts, all of which are funded by grants. The

carts are currently located in four community clubhouses: two serve members from kindergarten through 12th grade; two serve children in kindergarten to 6th grade. Two more Charlie Carts are used in school-based locations: one in an elementary school and another in a middle school.

The Boys & Girls Clubs here is active in 28 locations, including 21 school-based clubs based in campus cafeterias. Its seven neighborhood clubs are strategically located in communities where youth need it most. This branch of the Boys & Girls Clubs works with 16,000 children annually and serves more than one million meals a year.

The Charlie Carts provide an opportunity for each club to teach members about healthy food choices and how to make nourishing snacks and dishes in a novel and interactive way using cool kitchen tools, says Motto. In turn, members share what they learn and promote healthy living. The clubs also use the Charlie Carts to communicate how to eat well without spending a lot—along with how to read a recipe, plan a meal, and other useful work and life skills.

“Knowledge is power. You are never too young or too old to learn about the power of good nutrition—even on a budget,” says Motto. “Helping our members understand the concept and value of a healthy lifestyle and passing that knowledge on to family and friends is one of our priorities.”

About the Charlie Cart Project

The Charlie Cart Project, a national nonprofit, provides kids with the knowledge and confidence to make healthy food choices through its unique all-in-one food and nutrition education program. Centered on the Charlie Cart—a portable, compact modern mobile kitchen, fully stocked with top-of-the-line equipment perfect for chefs of any age or experience level—the organization works with educators at schools, libraries, and food banks who use the cart in conjunction with a 54-lesson, K-5 curriculum aligned to Common Core standards. With classroom-tested recipes, hands-on cooking lessons, and nutrition programs, the Charlie Cart Project helps kids shape lifelong health; form deeper connections with their peers, families, and communities; connect the dots between food and the environment; and enhance learning in math, sciences, the arts, and more. Headquartered in Berkeley, California, the Charlie Cart Project launched in 2016 and now reaches over 500,000 children and families annually. Its ever-increasing span includes more than 2,000 educators across 650+ sites in 48 states. Learn more about the Charlie Cart Project [here](#).

Written by Sarah Henry
Designed by Henrike Yama
Cover photograph @ Jeanan Hann

With thanks to our Charlie Cart Project participants
February 2026

www.charliecart.org

Get in touch!

info@charliecart.org

[@gocharliecart](https://www.instagram.com/gocharliecart)

www.charliecart.org

