

North Names

A NEIGHBOR YOU SHOULD KNOW...

Thinking outside the kitchen

Chef at senior center takes healthy cooking series to the public

By Kathleen Ganster

It isn't a surprise that Jason Voyda loves to cook; after all, he is a chef. But what may be surprising is that he considers himself an artist.

"I was going to go to art school after I graduated from high school, but I also really loved to cook. I decided that I could become a chef and still be creative — that would allow me to do both of the things I loved," said the 35-year-old Butler resident.

Mr. Voyda is the director of dining services at St. John's Specialty Care Center, part of Lutheran SeniorLife in Mars. He recently began a series of public cooking presentations called "Stirring It Up in Your Community" that focus on wellness and preserving health.

"It is designed to educate and teach seniors because that is the population of our clients, but the information can be used by anyone," he said.

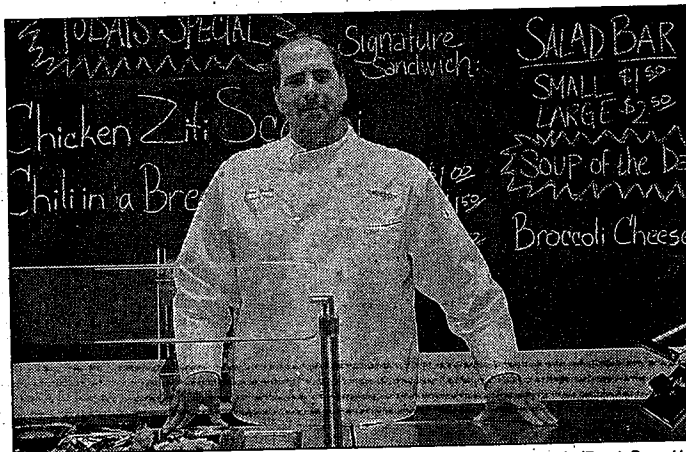
The series features once-a-month demonstrations held at senior and recreational centers.

"Our first class was held at the Cranberry Senior Center," he said. "The class topic was the top five brain-ready foods. We included informative handouts, recipes, food samples that we had prepared and a healthy brain-food prize basket."

The chef estimated 45 seniors attended the presentation. Joe Myers, clinical dietitian manager for St. John's, assisted Mr. Voyda. Both work for Morrison Senior Dining, the food service provider for Lutheran SeniorLife.

Mr. Voyda's first presentation was so well received he was asked for an encore.

"The class was a huge hit and the seniors are looking forward to us coming back," he said. The pair also has been asked to pres-



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

Jason Voyda, director of dining services at St. John Specialty Care Center in Mars.

ent their program to an AARP group and to Silver Sneakers participants.

It was at a fairly early age that Mr. Voyda discovered a love of cooking at an early age.

"I would sit at my grandmother's house and watch her cook. I couldn't believe she could make these wonderful things called pigs in a blanket," he said. His grandmother never used a recipe. "She would just be able to feel the texture of something and know what and how much of something else she needed to add. I'm afraid that is one of my downfalls. I like to be creative and artistic with foods, but then when people ask for a recipe, I never have one."

Mr. Voyda brings that creativity to his job at St. John Specialty Care Center.

"Many of our residents have lost a lot of things when they moved out of their houses. Food is one thing that they still have control over and a huge part of their lives. I want to make it something that is still fun and interesting to them," he said.

As part of these efforts, he has a "Recipe of the Month" program in which anyone can drop off a recipe in a box. One recipe is chosen each month and the resident who suggested it is the "chef" for that day.

"I have an extra chef coat that they wear. We put up a table with samples of the food and recipe cards. The resident sits behind the table and hands out the samples and recipe cards. It is a big hit and a lot of fun," he said.

Unlike some chefs who prefer to stay in their kitchens, Mr. Voyda likes the spotlight. "I love to cook in front of people, and I love doing the presentations. Designing the series allows me to be creative and out in the public," he said of his new program.

His programs epitomize his philosophy about his chosen career path. "Food truly is the way to a person's heart," he said. "Food is happiness."

Freelance writer Kathleen Ganster can be reached in care of suburbanliving@post-gazette.com

SNAPSHOT

JASON VOYDA

AGE: 35

HOMETOWN: Butler

EDUCATION:

Indiana University of Pennsylvania Academy of Culinary Arts; an associate degree in culinary arts

OCCUPATION:

Director of Dining Services at St. John's Specialty Care Center in Mars.

INTERESTS: Likes "anything outdoors" including hunting and fishing, drawing and cooking.

FAMILY: Son, Logan, 9; girlfriend, Sherri; her son, Buddy, 18; and their dog, Unko.