

# DENVER & THE WEST



## RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Chef Michael Benson gives a lesson in the use of a knife during a Work Options for Women class in the kitchen of the state Department of Human Services. The goal is to get people off welfare. »**STORY, 4B** Joe Amon, *The Denver Post*

# Work program lifts from welfare with a whisk

**The nonprofit teaches food skills to women and gets them a start in local restaurants.**

By Mike McPhee *The Denver Post*

Toni Schmid has changed the lives of hundreds of homeless or troubled women, giving them marketable skills, a sense of purpose, pride and self-esteem.

Schmid founded the nonprofit Work Options for Women 12 years ago as a way of getting women off the welfare rolls and into productive lives. She does it by teaching them food-service skills — working in commercial kitchens at restaurants, caterers and cafeterias.

Taking in about 50 women a year, Work Options gives them classroom training, hands-on experience, internships and then jobs at sustainable salaries.

"I've never succeeded at anything in my life," said Eunice Navarro, a 34-year-old high school dropout and single mother of six children who is working at an internship at Panzano Restaurant in the Hotel Monaco. "This is the first thing I've accomplished. For once in my life, I've got a positive attitude, I feel confident."

Schmid has been so successful that in mid-March, she will open a second restaurant, Cafe Options at 1650 Curtis St. in the U.S. Bank tower.

"You don't have to read or write; you don't have to speak English. Yet you can still work your way up into management with the right attitude," she said.

In 1997, she formed Work Options, a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, to train the women.

Two years later, when the city built the large Department of Human Services building for its 1,100 employees at West 12th Avenue and Federal Boulevard, she leased the cafeteria from the city and brought her trainees in for hands-on learning.

Today, the cafeteria trainees, led by executive chef Michael Benson, serve about 300 meals a day.

Last year's net revenues contributed about 40 percent of Work Options' annual operating budget of just over \$1 million. The rest is made up of donations from foundations and individuals, said Schmid, who in 1987 founded The Gathering Place, a daytime shelter that now cares for 600 homeless women a day.

"Work Options is incredible," said restaurant consultant John Imbergamo, who has taken such an interest in Work Options that he now sits on its board of directors. "There's a huge, steady need for food-service workers. ... Work Options is a very practical and sensible program that works."

While the women are in training for 12 to 16 weeks, they receive only a small stipend that doesn't affect their welfare benefits.

Once they graduate, most find work at \$9 to \$11 an hour, working their way up to better-paying jobs at places such as Safeway, Swedish Medical Center, Mad Greens and 3 Tomatoes Catering.

According to the Women's Foundation of Colorado, a single woman needs to earn \$15 an hour to sustain



Chef Karen Kachler, second from right, emphasizes a lesson in the Work Options for Women program. Students hone their skills in the cafeteria at the state Department of Human Services building. *Joe Amon, The Denver Post*

herself with necessities, while a woman with two young children in day care needs \$21 an hour.

With the cafeteria's steady success, Schmid began planning her second restaurant more than two years ago. Schmid was able to raise \$500,000 in

donations for the 42-seat Cafe Options.

Catherine Henry, a career employee of the food-service giant Aramark, retired a few years ago, joined Work Options and will oversee Cafe Options.

"Some of our women will come here for additional training, learning the finer points of a restaurant," Schmid said.

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