

Nonprofit cafe serves hope to Madison County

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Cynthia Hart knew that she was ready for a new chapter in her life but did not know what the pages would read.

After 40-plus years in the restaurant business, the owner of Cyn Shea's Café and Catering was ready for a change in 2015. Hart wanted to slow down, spend time with her husband Dan, a retired firefighter, and play with grandchildren. That restless feeling persisted as Hart drove through Nashville in early 2016. Passing by a restaurant, she was struck by an odd feeling but continued to drive onto her hotel. Later in her room, Hart picked up a local magazine to find the restaurant – The Cookery – profiled in the publication.

Turns out, The Cookery was not just a restaurant, it also had a mission: helping homeless students by training and equipping them in culinary techniques and food safety, in order to prepare them for employment in Nashville's food industry.

"I just knew I was being called to learning more about what they do," Hart said.

Hart would make several trips to Nashville to talk with The Cookery's owners and gather more knowledge about their ministry, which was both a café and nonprofit.

"I wanted to know if the Lord was speaking to us about a similar ministry," she said.

In 2016, that ministry, Serving Hope, Inc. was born and Cyn Shea's became a 501c3 nonprofit, channeling 100 percent of revenue into their new job training program.

"The whole year was a total dedication to transforming a 23-year-old business into a nonprofit," Hart said.

People cautioned her against starting the venture. Hart was told that she would give up her retirement, her descendants' inheritance. But Hart saw a greater need in the community.

"The more I did my homework I found that 42 percent of the population in a one-mile radius (of Cyn Shea's) lives below the poverty line," Hart said. "Huntsville has one of the wealthiest zip codes in Alabama yet it is neighbored by the third poorest zip code."

Serving Hope offers employment opportunities to those in need – veterans, recovering drug and alcohol addicts, victims of domestic abuse and people struggling with disabilities. Students undergo a seven-month program that includes learning culinary skills, workplace etiquette, volunteerism, financial planning, personal grooming, and resume and job search training. In addition, the students receive two weeks of farm-to-table training through organic garden partners. While in the program, students also network with community partners to prepare for post-program employment.

"We are an employment and life skills school, we want people to work," Hart said.

Serving Hope's curriculum is designed to start a new student every three weeks. Each student will receive one-on-one training from a staff member who has completed the ServSafe program. All staff members of the café are either teachers or students.

Even before Serving Hope was created, Hart's restaurant was unique upon its contemporaries. In an industry where drug use is rampant, turnover is high and personnel problems are common, Hart made it known that her business was drug-free and that random drug tests would be part of employment – and that if employees were struggling with addiction, Hart would be there to help.

Faith is the thread that weaves through the tapestry of Cyn Shea's and Serving Hope. Bible studies are held at the cafe and faith and religion are an open topic among the staff.

Serving Hope is currently the only café in Alabama that operates as a 501c3 nonprofit and as a new organization, is not eligible for many corporate partnerships which require nonprofits to have several years of experience under their belts. Transforming into a nonprofit has been an uphill climb, but one that Hart walks in faith.

"I don't know where tomorrow will lead but I am glad that God is doing the leading and I am doing the following," she said.

It is a new path but one that is already making inroads helping others to a better life.

"We are in the season where we are learning how to do what we've committed to do," said Hart.

"I know the Lord has big plans for us."

To learn more about Serving Hope, Inc. visit <http://cynsheas.com/serving-hope/>.



Photo by Bryan Bacon

"The whole year was a total dedication to transforming a 23-year-old business into a nonprofit," says Cynthia Hart on transforming Cyn Shea's Café and Catering into a nonprofit.



Photo by Bryan Bacon

Cynthia Hart stands in her restaurant business, Cyn Shea's Café and Catering, which also ministers to those in need by providing employment opportunities.