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How Sweet It Is To Give To The Community

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Who knew that eating a brownie could help the community.

That's exactly what Connie Milstein aspires to accomplish. Connie's Bakery & General Store at 41 S. Moger Ave. in Mount Kisco isn't an ordinary shop. In fact, it has a mission to help those in need through charitable giving as well as job training through apprenticeship programs.

"We decided it was time for the private community to step to the plate," Milstein, an attorney and principal of Ogden Cap Properties LLC in New York City, said at the Feb. 21 opening of her store.

Milstein's idea was to open a bakery, hire people who could be trained in the food industry and donate 100 percent of the profits to charity. This month's beneficiary is Food-PATCH, a hunger relief charity based in Millwood.

"I think it's very exciting," Christina Rohatynskyj, director of Food-PATCH, said. "They're doing so much. I wish them all the success in the world."

Rohatynskyj added that "it makes all the sense in the world" to buy baked goods from Connie's because the money goes to charity.

Five other charities will benefit through Foundation Sweet Success, the giving vehicle for Connie's Bakery, according to Debbie McCarthy, director of

marketing and community outreach at Connie's. The books will be open and completely audited, McCarthy said. "It will be totally transparent."

At the end of the year, profits will be divided and distributed equally to all six charities.

"It wouldn't be fair for the beneficiary who was featured in August," McCarthy said of how the profits are split so every organization gets the same amount.

In addition, patrons are given brochures about the charity they are helping to raise public awareness about the numerous charities in the Hudson Valley.

Milstein, a South Salem resident, decided Mount Kisco was the right place for her bakery based on its size and diversity.

"Mount Kisco is a mixed community," she said. "It's sort of a small city. Mount Kisco sort of had it all for us."

Through JobSTAR, Milstein was able to hire four employees who will be trained to work in the bakery. JobSTAR is a collaboration between Westchester Community College and the county's Department of Social Services. It provides educational training, case management and job placement to low-income individuals, according to Joanne Conway, director of JobSTAR.

"Connie's will work to train the students," Conway said. "JobSTAR will

evaluate throughout the year and then help them find jobs."

It's resume building, Conway said. "It's a phenomenal experience," she said of the venture.

Milstein said she wanted to work with JobSTAR to help people who need that first job on their resume to get ahead. The apprentices are paid living wages and receive benefits. They will work at the bakery for a year.

The apprentices are the bakers. They assist sous chef, Simeon Manber, with all the preparation and baking. Manber is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and was a sous chef at the Trustees Dining Room of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Manber said the crew of four trainees practiced for a week or so and that baking started Feb. 20 in time for the following day's grand opening. By opening morning, they had baked thousands of different cookies, cupcakes and other treats.

"It's great how crowded it is," he said of the people attending the opening. "I'm pleased with the way things are going."

Manber couldn't be happier with his staff. "When we found these guys at JobSTAR, I was thrilled," he said. "I've been really impressed."

The crew covered a lot in a very short period of time, Manber said, adding that they didn't have a great deal of baking experience.

"These guys really care about what they're doing," he said. "I feel very good about this."

For Rochelle Johnson Sr. of Elmsford the opportunity to work at the bakery was one he couldn't turn down.

"It's a great opportunity for me," Johnson said. "It's my dream."

Johnson, 35 and a father of three, said he had taken home economics in middle and high school and wanted to work in the food industry.

"We made everything here," he said, pointing at the display case that included cupcakes, cookies and candy and caramel apples.

When Johnson leaves his apprenticeship in a year, he plans to stay in the field.

"I want to work in a big bakery," he said. "It will give me the opportunity to learn even more."

John Kortmulder of Mount Kisco, a yoga instructor at 17 Main St., stopped by the shop during the grand opening, because it has a "civic-minded, caring purpose."

"This kind of enterprise really brings out the best in people," he said.

"There's something here for everyone," Milstein said of the numerous baked goods, country craft items, jams, jellies and syrups the shop sells. They'll even do gift baskets.

"We're trying to buy from vendors in New York," McCarthy said of the items the store sells. Milstein buys supplies for the bakery and retail items from small farmers and craftspeople in New York.

If the store is a success, Milstein said, maybe in the future there will be more Connie's Bakeries opening up.

FYI: For Your Information

Nothing gets wasted

At the end of each day, surplus baked goods aren't thrown away. They will be donated to an organization like Food-PATCH and distributed to families in need. In fact, when the crew was cutting out heart-shaped brownies, it was apprentice Rochelle Johnson Sr.'s idea to not even let the edges of the brownies go to waste. "I thought, instead of throwing them away we could sell them," he said. So Rochelle's Brownie Edges were added to the list of items to be sold.

Foundation Sweet Success

In lieu of purchases at the shop, tax-deductible contributions can also be made. Visit Connie's Web site at www.connies.org or call 914-242-2014.