

KitchenKids promotes learning in world's original classroom

Posted by [Editor](#) on Thursday, December 15, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Personal setbacks spur business idea



Marquita Olive, left, and Leslie Saunders of KitchenKids host a cooking demonstration at North Fulton Community Charities using low-cost food items.

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Leslie Saunders and Marquita Olive have taken the basket of lemons that life has handed them and planted the seeds to help others. Along the way, they've learned the lessons of resiliency, humility, giving back and making a difference in their communities.

As owners/founders of KitchenKids, the duo has created a program that teaches children about cooking, while instilling a foundation of reading, math and other skills they need to be successful. The support they receive

from North Fulton Community Charities, of which they are also clients, has provided a platform for their message, which has spread globally.

KitchenKids is built upon the concept that the kitchen has always been the original play and learning center. Key to the program is an interactive website where kids can learn life management skills and explore science, math and logic, geography, history, new languages and other cultures.

Although KitchenKids is a relatively new company, Saunders had been mulling over the concept of KitchenKids for years. It started with a storm that hit in July 2004 that left her stranded with 19 unexpected guests, including Olive and her daughter. As Saunders tried to pull something together for a meal for the masses, she found seven kids under 11 who all wanted to help out.

“To end the children’s argument over who was going to help me cook, I gave each child an important age-appropriate task,” said Saunders. “As I watched the kids work together, it dawned on me that they were learning how to follow directions, how to work cooperatively, measuring, reading and discussing the nutritional value and the geographic origin of the different dishes we were preparing.”

Olive remembers that day, and recalls Saunders describing her vision of what would eventually become KitchenKids.

“Leslie turned toward me and said, ‘I would love to see a television show where kids could cook and learn about different cultures, geography, history, math, languages, teamwork, etc.,’” recalled Olive.

Little did Saunders know that her best friend was writing down that dream, and soon sent out an email to friends and colleagues introducing them to the KitchenKids idea. The group met in Roswell a few weeks later, and the project soon became a reality.

“It was just that effortless and just that divine,” said Olive. “And despite the few who thought it was a delusion, KitchenKids is now a tangible commodity — and even the USDA is now a part of our delusion!”

While the television show is still a dream, the program has expanded to include videos, school-based resources and the interactive website with thousands of members.

The mission of KitchenKids has focused on helping parents, educators and communities grow kids into physically healthy and emotionally intelligent adults who will in turn think frugal, think inclusion, think humanitarian and pay it forward, said the founders.

The quest for funding to grow and expand has been a difficult journey for Saunders and Olive.

“When we first embarked on this mission, we were employed and had no problem funding the organization ourselves,” said Olive. “However, when we both experienced severe downturns, self-funding became extremely more difficult.”

How you can help
KitchenKids

- ♥ **Support the Global Tasting Adventures Program**, which helps families understand how people are all more alike than different. The intercultural networking program allows families to experience the culinary traditions of a different culture each month. Passports have been designed allowing kids to track nutritional, geographic and historic facts and insights into each culture they experience.
- ♥ **Buy a membership.** The annual cost of a KitchenKids membership is \$5 per child – which breaks down to less than 42 cents a month. Olive said people are always amazed when they realize all that a child gets for such a minimal fee. But so many of the kids who could benefit from the program come from homes where parents are already struggling to make ends meet. They can't afford any extracurricular activities, camp, tutoring and/or language lessons, and an additional \$5 may be out of the question.
- ♥ **Make a donation.** Olive and Saunders still struggle financially to keep KitchenKids viable and are grateful for any assistance. KitchenKids is currently a nonprofit organization registered in Georgia, but funds are being raised to file as a 501(c)3 organization. This would allow the company to accept tax deductible donations and apply for grants.
- ♥ For more information on KitchenKids, visit www.kitchenkidz.weebly.com/.

It was not long ago that Saunders and Olive were both fully vested in the American dream, with stable housing, good jobs and prospects. But the “economic tsunami,” as Olive describes it, washed away much of their foundation, leaving them both adrift.

Prior to 2007, Saunders, who has lived in Roswell for 10 years, frequently donated food, clothing, furniture and other items to charity groups because she had much to share.

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“However, in mid-2007, I experienced a series of tragedies that resulted in me nearly losing everything I once thought was important,” she said. “As a result, my relationship with community charity groups changed from being on the giving end to being on the receiving end.”

The story is not much different for Olive, whose job was lost in March 2009 when the company she worked for in Florida went bankrupt. She reached out to her best friend, Saunders, who generously opened up her Roswell home to Olive and her daughter.

Tough times continued for both, and soon Olive found herself in the waiting room of North Fulton Community Charities, adrift and seeking help.

“Asking for help is hard, and it is beyond humiliating for anyone who has always been the giver,” said Olive, who grew up in Mississippi. “That fateful morning, I cried in the NFCC waiting room where the staff and many of the recipients tried to console me. As I sat there sobbing, I made a decision that NFCC would be at the top of my list of organizations I wanted to pay it forward to, once I regained financial stability.”

Though KitchenKids has yet to reach financial stability, the two work tirelessly to promote its message, confident that growth will come in time, and every day brings small miracles and progress.

“People from humble beginnings share a connectedness with the world where ‘paying it forward’ is a given,” said Olive. “I believe this and am passionately paying it forward with KitchenKids. All children should have access to educational resources despite their humble beginnings.”

One recent addition to the website is a listing of recipes, using most frequently donated food items.

“As I brought home the food [from NFCC], Leslie would create extraordinary meals and friends would beg for the recipes,” said Olive, whose friendship with Saunders goes back years to when they both lived in Memphis.

The recipes and story behind the meals came to the attention of NFCC, which now brings in KitchenKids to host cooking demonstrations for its NFCC clients.

“[We promote] how to ‘eat healthy without being wealthy’ and how NFCC families could benefit from information we could share from our own experiences,” said Saunders.

Looking to the future, Saunders would love to see KitchenKids resources and programs used in school system across the country, and activity kiosks in the waiting areas of pediatric doctors’ and dentists’ offices, public assistance provider offices, airports and malls. But she knows KitchenKids is a dream that can’t be abandoned.

And when times get particularly dark, she is inspired by one of her favorite quotes: “When you hit rock bottom, remember that God made the rocks.”

DIS & DAT

We call this recipe “Dis and Dat” because the first time we made it we didn’t have much money and needed something healthy and filling. We used what our Southern ancestors used to call “a little bit of dis and a little bit of dat” – food we had on hand. What we created was so delicious that it has become a meal requested by kids and adults! It’s easy to make and takes about 15 minutes.

Ingredients:

1 pound of ground turkey or beef
1 medium diced onion
1 can of diced tomatoes

1 can of green beans
1 can of black beans
1 can of corn
3 Tbsp. of minced garlic
1 tsp. of black pepper
1 tsp. of salt
2 Tbsp. of cooking oil

Directions:

Brown meat in heated oil. Add onions and garlic while meat is browning. Add vegetables including juices, salt and pepper. Don’t be afraid to add additional vegetables if you have some handy!
Simmer mixture for 10 minutes.
Serve over rice, pasta or grits.

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