

Coordinating a Collaborative Commissary Kitchen

BY ELLEN MICHEL

It's 5:00 p.m. on the first Friday night in January as I swing behind the old Coca-Cola building near downtown Bloomington, Ind. At the buzz of the intercom, a staff person from the Bloomingfoods Commissary Kitchen answers the door, then helps load a large thermal food warmer into the van. Whole-grain bread and sugarsnap peas are ready for delivery to the WonderLab Museum of Science, Health, and Technology, where a new monthly Science of Art series is being launched for adults, teens, and young children. The small-plate meal is served in a lab set up as a family-style café, where the prospect of a quick dinner featuring Bloomingfoods macaroni and cheese is greeted with robust enthusiasm.

This once-a-month catered dinner represents the expanded capacity of our co-op to respond to groups and individuals wanting to use our services. The Bloomingfoods Commissary Kitchen, in operation since mid-2011, represents a long-term collaboration involving many community stakeholders.

Building a kitchen, creating jobs

Signs on the brick façade of the renovated building identify it as Food Works for Middle Way House. It is located next to the New Wings apartment complex and down the street from The Rise, buildings that are part of a housing and job-skills-development program started by Middle Way House, a not-for-profit social service agency with a mission “to end violence, both structural and interpersonal, in the lives of women and children.” Nationally recognized for innovative programming, Middle Way House offers free and confidential crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional housing, childcare services, and job-skills training to women whose lives have been impacted by rape and/or domestic violence.

Middle Way Food Works began in 2002, preparing nutritious meals out of a local church kitchen to serve area childcare programs. As more catering services were gradually added, a number of like-minded community partners began to envision a kitchen facility that could serve several functions:

- Provide low-rent food preparation space;



Head Chef Dan Borders and Kitchen Manager Rodney Schmidt in the Bloomingfoods Commissary Kitchen.

- Provide space for cooking classes; and
- Expand the capacity of Food Works for Middle Way House to serve more clients and create more jobs.

A USDA Growing Healthy Communities grant, with Bloomingfoods as a coauthor, was critical. The grant enabled the purchase of the current building and the design and construction of the Commissary Kitchen while encouraging programmatic collaboration among various partners, including Bloomingfoods. In mid-2011, following discussions with Middle Way House and the creation of a mutual arrangement, the co-op began managing the Commissary Kitchen.

Recognized as a community leader in the preparation of healthful foods, Bloomingfoods was enlisted to bring greater efficiency and experience to all aspects of the prepared foods project, including billing, coverage of utilities and insurance, human resources, marketing, and product development. The co-op was a known friend of Middle Way House's sustainability efforts, too, including the cultivation of a rooftop garden and other food plants on the property, worm composting, and recycling.

“What we have now is a mutually beneficial alliance in which both organizations can help

each other in significant ways,” says George Huntington, general manager of Bloomingfoods. “It’s a melding of two cultures that involves a number of challenges, especially as we establish our common systems, but already we’re seeing benefits to both groups that can help us be better than the sum of our parts.”

Making it work

Many things have happened in the six months of this collaboration. Middle Way Food Works staff became employees of Bloomingfoods, and Bloomingfoods staff participated in domestic violence-awareness training. One of three Bloomingfoods retail sites, the Kirkwood store (near the Indiana University campus), added a deli with made-to-order foods while expanding its prepared-foods section with items from the Commissary Kitchen. Community cooking classes now regularly take place on-site, and a handful of clients use the kitchen to make small-batch specialty products, realizing specific goals of the Growing Healthy Communities grant.

The transition also has involved repositioning key staff from the delis in its East and Near West Side stores. “Previously, both kitchens

The Commissary Kitchen represents a long-term collaboration involving many community stakeholders.

were stretched,” observes Alan Simmerman, fresh foods coordinator. “As our sales increased, there were times when we could barely keep up, or when we couldn’t say yes to additional catering. Having a central facility has already helped us merge systems within our three stores.

“This first year, we are consolidating and coordinating, looking at our recipe selection and improving our house recipe catalogues to get them all combined. Where we used to have three hummus recipes, now we have one,” Simmerman explains. He has been involved in the project from the beginning.

“When we sat down at the request of Middle Way to begin negotiations, we approached this collaboration by looking at our needs and their needs, going right back to our mission statements. We as a co-op realized that to continue our growth, especially in the prepared-foods area, we were going to need a commissary kitchen. Middle Way Food Works knew that there’s a certain volume a kitchen that size needs to achieve in order to be profitable, and they needed help with that.

“We brought to the table not only our buying power and our pricing from different purveyors, but also our experience and skill in kitchen management and our volume. It became a very apparent partnership, a very easy partnership to look at. We both wanted to move in the same direction in the community, and we shared a lot of the same concerns.”

The financial picture for Food Works has already improved. “We’ve helped to stabilize the operation and get some money back to Middle Way, not only in savings and efficiencies, but also through a customer-funded, voluntary service charge on key Food Works programs—money that goes directly to the agency,” Huntington says.

Looking ahead

Simmerman expects to continue to grow contracted caterings, reaching customers who may

not have been aware of either the co-op or Food Works before. The Commissary Kitchen now serves local Head Start programs and provides lunches to The Project School, a nearby charter school.

“We’re also experiencing corporate interest,” Simmerman continues. “For the past six months, we’ve had a contract with Hoosier Energy—a co-op—for healthy lunches. They have a program developed by their human resources department for the health of their employees, a proactive approach. They’ve been buying lunches from Food Works five days a week—we set up a salad bar and a hot bar for them right on-site. This is an example of the kind of thing we can do now that we couldn’t before. As a community resource for healthy cooking, I can see that there are a lot of potential partnerships of this kind out there.”

Bloomingfoods- and Food Works-branded products are another possible area for growth. “The Commissary Kitchen has really opened up the eyes of our staff to the idea of getting branded deli products into other areas of the stores. I expect us to soon have a pizza program at all three stores. We hope to eventually expand our branding experience throughout the entire store, into our frozen, refrigerated, and grocery sets.” Food Works has already developed a line of bread products available through the co-op.

“It’s also very exciting that having a Commissary Kitchen has made department managers and buyers take a look at the big picture in a positive way,” Simmerman says. “The project involves a certain amount of compromise and cultural change, but that has opened up thinking for staff about possibilities that can lead to growth. We’ve had a lot of cultural shifts—a lot

of ‘us and them’ shifting to the way we do it.”

“Our co-op has seen a great deal of success with the neighborhood grocery store concept,” Huntington explains. “While prepared foods is a key category for perimeter sales, finding the space to actually make fresh foods can be a challenge for stores with a smaller footprint. We see our ability to manage this large Commissary Kitchen as one key to the continued success of our neighborhood stores. And it’s an honor to collaborate with such a fine community resource.” ■

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