

Helping Hands

MEDICAL STUDENTS COOK FOR A CAUSE

by Margaret McCormick

Everybody wishes for a helping hand in the kitchen at times.

The Ronald McDonald House in Syracuse has a dedicated corps of volunteers, including individuals, church groups, and teams from local businesses who cook and bake for the house and make it a priority to keep guest families fed well. A recent addition to the volunteer roster, and a first in terms of their affiliation, is a group of students from the College of Medicine at SUNY Upstate Medical University. They call themselves Helping Hands.

"The medical students all of a sudden reached out, and it's such a natural," says Beth Trunfio, executive director of the Ronald McDonald House.

The group's members, all first and second-year medical students, spend most of their time in the classroom and textbooks at this stage of their studies. But they carve out time to get to the Ronald McDonald House and prepare home-cooked meals for families whose children are undergoing medical treatment or are hospitalized nearby.

"The people staying there are dealing with a lot, and I don't think they should have to cook for themselves," says Jaclyn Sisskind '09, the group's leader. "To have something there in the fridge means a lot, I think."

Since fall, about 40 second-year students have joined the club. They reach into their own pockets and pocketbooks for grocery money and supplement it with money raised from a bake sale and a budget of \$250 funded by Upstate.

Helping Hands has proven to be such a popular activity that members have committed to making dinner twice a month through the end of the school year.



College of Medicine students Amanda Brender, Kathleen Carroll, Aimee Talleur, and Jaclyn Sisskind in the kitchen of the Syracuse Ronald McDonald House.

"A lot of what we make is comfort food," says Sisskind.

"We try to do things that are warm and make people feel like home."

—Jaclyn Sisskind '09

Cooking experience is not required. Members shop, chop, slice, dice, wash dishes, share recipe ideas, plan menus and make satisfying meals—usually main course, salad and dessert—for families staying at the house. Six people is a crowd in the kitchen, so Sisskind or one of the club's other officers take turns leading small groups in preparing meals.

On a recent Wednesday, the group brought along a pan of baklava made and donated by David Beach, PhD, of the Department of Microbiology at Upstate, and assembled two pans of black bean lasagna, a spinach salad with cherry tomatoes, diced turnip, and a rainbow of diced peppers, and a dessert made with layers of crumbled brownies, chocolate pudding, and cherry pie filling, covered with whipped topping.

Their job was done in just over an hour. They left cooking instructions, headed back to campus, and looked forward to hearing how the meal went over in an e-mail from Ronald McDonald House manager and volunteer coordinator Susan Minard.

So far, the Helping Hands meals have received nothing but positive reviews.

"They have a nice menu selection," says Minard, who has at least "a taste" of every-

thing prepared by the students, so she can give them feedback.

She particularly liked a dish called Sticky Chicken, prepared with duck sauce, soy sauce and orange juice and served with a broccoli and red pepper salad "that was just delicious."

"Everything they make is pretty basic, but because of that it's successful," Minard says.

Most of the menus are planned by Sisskind, a second-year medical student who grew up in Manlius, majored in biology and sociology at Union College and earned a master's degree in nutrition from the State University at Buffalo before returning to Syracuse for the next chapter in her education.

Her mother, Robin Sisskind, has been a Weight Watchers leader for more than 20 years, and, like her, Jaclyn favors recipes with "a healthy twist." She has adapted some family recipes, such as the black bean lasagna, for use at the Ronald McDonald House, trolls the Internet for ideas, and also finds inspiration in magazines, such as *Cooking Light*.

For January, she planned a menu that included meatloaf and "awesome mashed potatoes" made with spinach and onions.

"A lot of what we make is comfort food," Sisskind says. "We try to do things that are kid-friendly. We try to do things that are warm and make people feel like home."

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Medical student makes a community connection. Signa Perkins, fourth-year medical student and 2005 Sarah Loguen Fraser Scholar, met with second-grade students at LeMoyne Elementary School in Syracuse on February 13. The students were studying famous scientists and doctors during Black History month and Perkins met with them to discuss the life skills necessary to reach their goals. When Perkins asked how many students planned to become doctors, about 75 percent of the children raised their hands. After graduation in May, Perkins plans to do an internship in internal medicine, followed by a fellowship in cardiology.



Medical students help warm the hearts of local refugees. The SUNY Upstate Medical University community contributed 75 blankets for local refugees from Somalia and other African nations. The blanket drive was a collaborative effort by Upstate College of Medicine students and Syracuse University's Maxwell Africa Caucus on behalf of the Refugee Resettlement Program of the Center for New Americans. From left: Susan Stearns, PhD, director of community outreach initiatives for medical students, joins first-year medical students Rokhsanna Sadeghi, Meryl Kahan, and Thomas Man in bringing blankets to the Refugee Resettlement Program.