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Inaugural class of the Foodlink Career Fellowship celebrates graduation, launch of new careers

Fellows prepare for next steps, including full-time jobs at Wegmans

ROCHESTER – They came to Foodlink in search of opportunity. Now – a year later – eight members of the Foodlink Career Fellowship have graduated with improved culinary skills, confidence, and hope for what the future holds.

Thursday's graduation ceremony at the City of Rochester Public Market marked the culmination of the inaugural year of the program, which trains individuals who have experienced barriers to employment for middle-skills careers in the regional food industry. Fellows were nominated by a community-based organization and went through a rigorous curriculum that includes classroom instruction, on-the-job training in the Foodlink Community Kitchen, and a three-month externship at Wegmans Food Markets.

"This is a proud moment for these eight individuals – and for our entire organization," said Julia Tedesco, President & CEO of Foodlink. "This is one of the most innovative programs we've ever launched in our 40-year history, and it truly demonstrates our commitment to addressing the root causes of hunger in our communities. We're inspired by the dedication and commitment shown by this first graduating class."

The Foodlink Career Fellowship began last July after more than two years of preparation by Foodlink's staff and several community stakeholders. Foodlink sought to maximize its recent investment in a \$5 million commercial kitchen by training people for living-wage careers, and helping them avoid dependency on the emergency food system. While food banking remains the core of Foodlink's operations, addressing the root causes of hunger through the launch of other food-related programs has been a priority for the past decade.

“Our Fellows made a lot of sacrifices, put in a ton of work, and really challenged themselves to explore new growth opportunities for themselves personally and professionally,” said Jes Scannell, Foodlink’s Director of Career Empowerment Initiatives. “Today, we both celebrate their achievements and recognize that this is just the beginning of their careers as culinarians.”

The inaugural class includes: Jehmel Alexander, Anthony Arroyo, Kristen Gates, LaRhonda ‘Rudy’ Harris, Bre’Onn Hepburn, Da’Quan Quick, Gloria Soldevila Ramos, and Jenna Raymond Torres. Alexander, Arroyo, Gates, Harris and Soldevila Ramos were offered positions at Wegmans, while three others are still progressing through the final stages of the program.

"The past year has been quite a journey, but I made it," Harris said. "I love putting on my Wegmans chef coat every day because it's my way of showing my three kids how to be a stronger person, and how to achieve your goals."

Wegmans was instrumental in developing the structure for the Fellowship, and – of course – hosting the externship. Chefs at several store locations and restaurants served as vital mentors as the Fellows navigated the rigors of full-time work in the kitchen.

“It’s been a pleasure watching this first class of Fellows grow and mature as culinary professionals,” said Chef Donald Harter, Director of Asian & Sushi for Wegmans Food Markets. “This has been an exciting and collaborative partnership for us, and we’re thrilled to welcome many of them to the Wegmans family.”

The launch of the program was made possible through private funding from the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund, William and Sheila Konar Foundation, and ESL Charitable Foundation. The Konar Foundation recently granted Foodlink a second gift of \$150,000 to support the Fellowship’s second class, set to begin this summer.

"The Konar Foundation chose to support the launch of the Foodlink Career Fellowship because of its focus on providing a pathway to prosperity," said Howard Konar, trustee for the William & Sheila Konar Foundation. "Congratulations to the program's inaugural graduates. We wish them all the best as they realize their true potential in the regional food industry."

On Thursday, Fellows were called one by one to accept their certificates in front of friends, family members and supporters, including many of the agencies that nominated them. Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul was also in attendance, praising the inaugural class and delivering remarks about the state’s commitment to workforce development initiatives. Earlier this year, the Fellowship was recognized as an official New York State apprenticeship program.

"The Foodlink Career Fellowship is a great workforce development tool, providing students with the culinary and leadership skills they need," Hochul said. “Members of the program received on-the-job training in the field and are prepared for good jobs at companies like Wegmans and others. We want to make sure all New Yorkers have the access and resources they need to be trained to fill jobs in the agriculture and culinary industry across the state.”

Foodlink is actively recruiting for its second class and is accepting nominations for prospective applicants until July 1. Anyone interested in learning more about the program or nominating a Fellow should contact Jes Scannell at jscannell@foodlinkny.org.

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About Foodlink

Foodlink is a community food resource center and the Feeding America food bank serving Allegany, Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Orleans, Seneca, Wayne, Wyoming, and Yates counties. For 40 years, we have leveraged the power of food to transform lives, end hunger and build healthier communities. Through good stewardship, innovation and collaboration, Foodlink mobilizes a diverse network of partners and stakeholders to eradicate both the symptoms and root causes of hunger.

Our suite of food access programs provides new access points to nutritious and affordable food in underserved communities. Our team of nutrition educators empowers people at risk of diet-related illness with the skills and knowledge to make healthy choices. Our food banking operations distribute millions of pounds of food to a network of hundreds of human service agencies throughout our service area. The Foodlink Community Kitchen prepares and delivers thousands of meals daily for Rochester children, supports our regional agricultural economy by slicing locally grown apples, and hosts a one-of-a-kind career empowerment program to train individuals with barriers to employment for careers in the regional food industry. Learn more about how we are creating healthy futures for every community we serve at www.foodlinkny.org, or follow us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram at @foodlinkny.

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