

# 'Middle Class

The 180° Kitchen at City of Refuge prepares 1,200 meals daily for the residents of Eden Village, a shelter for single women and their children. The kitchen is also home to the Culinary Arts School, a 12-week training program.



# by Middle Age'

## Atlanta Nonprofit City of Refuge Uses Strategic Programming to Break the Cycle of Poverty for the Long-term

by Lauren Weiss

Atlanta, Georgia is a city in need of a solution.

Approximately 25 percent of the residents live below the poverty level and a 2014 Brookings Institute study found that between 2000 and 2011, the suburban poor population of Atlanta grew 159 percent. Over 88 percent of the metro area's poor population resided in suburban areas outside of the city, where transportation can be limited, making steady work difficult to keep.

Atlanta is also home to the largest wealth disparity in the U.S. According to a Brookings Data Now report, the richest five percent of households earned more than \$280,000, while the poorest 20 percent earned under \$15,000. Atlanta recently ranked as one of the worst metro areas in the U.S. in terms of economic mobility for low-income families, which Brookings Institute researchers believe is partially due to the high levels of racial and economic segregation in the area.

### **A City of Refuge Is Born**

Beginning as a feeding program in 1970, City of Refuge has evolved into a multi-faceted approach to intervening in and breaking the cycle of poverty.

The latest figures from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that in zip code 30314, the home of City of Refuge's more than 200,000 square foot campus, the need is even more acute. The area known as "the Bluff" has the highest crime rate per capita in Georgia, the highest rate of incarceration, the highest homeless population per capita, a less than 50 percent graduation rate, and a 40 percent unemployment rate. It is a community that has been plagued by poverty for decades.

Bolstered by their enormous space and the poverty surrounding them, City of Refuge knew they had to tackle an array of issues—not just food insecurity—in order to make a difference. Over the years, they opened a shelter, and their kitchen grew from simply serving the residents of their shelter system into a culinary school and catering enterprise. City of Refuge created programs to help single mother families, teen mothers, and children in their shelter and the surrounding community. They also partnered with the National Automotive Parts Association (NAPA) to run a mechanic training program.

In a city dubbed the “epicenter of suburban poverty in America” by the Brookings Institute, City of Refuge became an epicenter of innovative approaches to ending that poverty.

### Strategizing a Brighter Tomorrow for Atlanta

Terry Tucker, the Chief Strategy Officer of City of Refuge, has been with the organization for the last three years. He began his work there serving on the Board of Directors, and as the organization began a recent rapid expansion of services, he was asked to step in and manage the growth of City of Refuge. When asked what his role entails, he chuckled and replied, “That is a loaded question!”

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Being the Chief Strategy Officer, it turns out, entails doing almost everything outside of on-the-ground operations—though Tucker frequently steps in to be a part of those at events, as well, and can be spotted in the majority of event photos on the City of Refuge Facebook page. His office covers not only strategy to move the organization forward, but external relations, technology, program strategy, legal needs, and volunteer management.

“City of Refuge is unique in the sense that it is probably one of the only nonprofits that I know of that has an office of strategy,” said Tucker. “When you are trying to make an impact, if your organization is not integrated across the functions, you are going to have people doing things that

may be counterproductive to the true mission and the true overarching impact goals.”

By keeping nearly all operations under one umbrella, Tucker aims to form a cohesive environment in which all players are geared toward one mission: reduce the number of people who are experiencing or who will be born into poverty. On a more focused level, the goal at City of Refuge is for everyone who walks through their doors to reach middle class by middle age.

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City of Refuge built their model of intervention based on a 2012 Brookings Institute study entitled *Pathways to the Middle Class*. With this study as a guide, they decided on six key impact areas for interventions: housing, education, youth social and emotional development, health and wellness, vocational training, and social enterprise.

### Better Yourself, Better the Community

‘Social enterprise’ is perhaps one of the most unique focus areas at City of Refuge. A social enterprise is a moneymaking venture operated by a nonprofit for the benefit of their core services and programs. Rather than stopping at vocational training, they have created two enterprises on their campus: 180° Kitchen and the NAPA Training Center. These are not training programs that merely simulate work experiences in the safety of a classroom. 180° Kitchen students cater events and run a bistro on campus; NAPA students operate a live auto shop and serve customers. Both programs focus on industries in Atlanta that are consistently in need of employees, so students graduate into a favorable job market upon completing their training.

“We know that in order for individuals and communities to be self sufficient, we need to have more jobs and products that benefit the social structure of the country or community,” said Tucker. “We can get someone a job somewhere, but if we can get them a job where they are actually working on a socially beneficial product or service, we are basically killing two or three birds with one stone.”

It is this kind of strategic thinking based on both individual and community needs that has made these young programs so enormously successful: graduates of the

NAPA Training Center are guaranteed a position with NAPA, and there is a nearly 100 percent placement rate for graduates of 180° Kitchen's Culinary Arts School.

### Stepping into the 180° Kitchen

Behind the social enterprise of 180° Kitchen is the simple fact that started everything: people need to eat. City of Refuge needed to find a way to feed them that promoted healthy, happy living.

Serving the residents of Eden Village—a City of Refuge campus facility that provides shelter for single women and their children—is the primary focus of 180° Kitchen. Serving approximately 1,200 meals a day using food exclusively purchased from vendors, not donated, 180° Kitchen is all about promoting health and wellness for the City of Refuge residents.

With this kind of heavy demand for freshly prepared meals, a need arose for trained staff, and thus the Culinary Arts School was created. Chef Juliet Peters works with students in the morning teaching them baking, supervisory skills, basic sauces, food cost controls, proper preparation and fabrication of meats and vegetables, and how to make dishes that create a stir. In the afternoon they put their skills to the test preparing meals for residents. At the completion of the 12-week program, they take part in a job fair and showcase of their skills for local restaurants, and most receive multiple job offers from Atlanta businesses.

Outside of the residential food preparations, students have the opportunity to work in the kitchen of American Bistro, on-campus fine dining with a capacity of 120 people, a mobile food truck called The People's Food Truck, and a catering business serving large visiting groups, construction workers on the new Mercedes-Benz Stadium in downtown Atlanta, and any others who require their services in the community.

As if this array of experiences were not impressive enough for students of the Culinary Arts Program, they have also had the privilege of having as their chief culinary officer Walter Scheib, former White House Executive Chef under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Scheib advised City of Refuge on improving the Culinary Arts Program, worked closely with students, and even brought students with him to his own large catered events to gain experience working in some of the most demanding catering environments in the country.

"He could be anywhere he wanted to be in the country, and he chose to come here and help these students who were in the 180° Kitchen regain some self sufficiency," said Tucker. "People always asked him why he would do that given where he was, and he said he has cooked for people who have everything and it was a pleasure for him to be at a place where people were using the art of cooking to be able to get back to where they have something of their own."

Tragically, Walter Scheib passed away in June of 2015, leaving behind a tremendous void for the students and staff who had grown to love working with him. They have since established the Walter Scheib Excellence in Culinary Arts Award and fund for the top student in each graduating class in his memory.



Chef Juliet Peters teaches students culinary skills in the mornings, and in the afternoons they put those skills to the test preparing meals for residents.

“Now you say, well how do you fill a void like that? Outside of him being my good friend and just mourning over the loss of him, obviously from a City of Refuge perspective that came across my mind,” said Tucker. “Fortunately, I did not have to think very long.”

Within a few weeks, calls poured in from the White House, from chefs who had worked with Scheib over the years and wanted to carry on his legacy at City of Refuge. In the coming months, they will take on a new chief culinary officer who will continue the work of refining the American Bistro and guiding the students of the Culinary Arts Program.

### **NAPA Training Center On-site that Benefits Residents and Those in the Community**

Still located on the campus of City of Refuge, but tackling the areas of vocational training and social enterprise in a wholly different way, is the NAPA Auto Repair Training Center. Here, 14 students per session undergo an intensive 40-hour a week, six-month course ending in guaranteed employment with NAPA if they complete the certification and meet the course requirements. This symbiotic relationship allows the Center to have knowledgeable instructors while NAPA is ensured their new employees are trained properly to serve their customers effectively.

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The Center focuses on recruiting and enrolling those in the community who might benefit most from this valuable training: veterans returning from military duty and seeking re-training in mechanics; those re-entering society following incarceration or rehabilitation and seeking opportunities with a certified training center; and students enrolled in City of Refuge’s on-campus private school for middle and high school aged students, Bright Futures Academy, wishing to enter vocational training. Students spend the morning in the classroom or learning online, and in the



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afternoon they complete in-shop training on a wide range of auto repairs and diagnostics.

As of summer 2015, the Center has graduated one adult class and started its second adult class and the two-year part time high school program. So far, it has proven a success. Retention and completion are high, and the Center continues to grow with state of the art tools, lifts, and parts to operate as a functioning auto shop serving the local community. As students continue to complete the program, Tucker is hoping the Center will be able to break even on operating costs and eventually generate a self-sustaining profit that will allow the Center to gain even more equipment and instructors.

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Ruben Williams, a classroom instructor in the Center, has watched the program evolve, but knows there is still much work to be done.

“When we first started we did not have computers, but now we do. We have NAPA online, which is a big help,” said Williams. “Since this is a new program, a lot of materials and things that are needed, they do not have. But everything is getting better.”

Another important feature of the training is that it covers a broad range of skills needed by NAPA and by any service center in the country. Students are not relegated exclusively to a position as a mechanic; they are also qualified to work retail parts jobs for NAPA, and learn how to interact with customers beyond just repairing their cars.

One of the graduates of the first class now works as a delivery driver for NAPA, bringing auto parts to the Center on a regular basis. She has been promoted several times, and students currently enrolled are able to see definitively what sticking with the course can mean. For people who have lived with financial uncertainty, whether they are veterans or students who have lived in poverty their entire life, seeing someone who has followed their current path to completion can be an important motivator. Obtaining certification

After completing the 12-week training program, at 180° Kitchen students take part in a job fair and showcase of their skills for local restaurants. Most students receive multiple job offers.

and a job from NAPA means financial stability, self-sufficiency, and regaining a sense of control.

“They are taking people from the neighborhood who may not have a chance to get this type of training on their own. ... I am hoping that maybe we can tweak the program to where instead of having just two graduating classes each year, maybe we can have three or four,” said Williams. “I hope [my students] take the sense that they were given something, and in the future they can give back.”

### **The Intervention Machine**

Beyond the 180° Kitchen and NAPA Auto Repair Training Center, City of Refuge has a roster of services reaching every kind of need. The Kindred Spirit Home takes in single teenage mothers, during their pregnancy and the first year after birth, to teach them valuable parenting skills and put them on a path to self-sufficiency and independent living. Their educational programs serve children from toddlers to teens, catering to their social and emotional development as well as their health. Eden Village provides single mothers and their families with emergency temporary shelter as well as long-term shelter and counseling services. Their internship program challenges teens to think about their community and strive for greatness.

On the sprawling campus of City of Refuge, it is clear that creativity is embraced in their search for strategic interventions that will be effective for both their clients and their community. ■

