



## NYCHA program helps residents start their own food businesses

By: Wendy Joan Biddlecombe



Sarah Stevens has always had an entrepreneurial spirit. But being a single mother, working a job as a security officer and lack of money always got in the way.

Stevens, 42, said she was thinking about checking out culinary school last year when she walked out of her building at the Carver Houses in Harlem, and saw a poster for NYCHA's new Food Business Pathways

Program that had fallen to the ground. She picked it up, and the rest is history.

Last month, Stevens was one of 18 women and three men in the first graduating class. The 10-week course encourages NYCHA residents to start food businesses, and participants receive business coaching and free licensing and permits.

Stevens is a New York City native who said she's always lived in public housing. She developed her business idea, which she hopes will be a Wall Street area lounge called "After 5," while working through the classes, and is planning to go into business with her eldest daughter, DeLahcei Livingston.

"I want it to be comfortable, relaxing, a little bit of music, R&B and jazz, (where you can get) a nice cocktail, sit down and enjoy yourself and be in a good atmosphere," Stevens said.

Stevens, who said it took her six years to perfect her macaroni and cheese and potato salad, said she got serious about cooking when Livingston's father passed away, and she found herself spending a lot of time at home caring for her daughter, who was 9 at the time.

"I had to do something with my time, so I cooked, I tried different things," Stevens said. "I was the mother of the floor. Everybody ate at my house."

Stevens said although she feels confident in her cooking, and has done freelance catering gigs, she had “no clue” when it comes to the legal steps necessary to start her own business. She has already obtained an LLC, and is set to get her food handlers license by the end of the month. She’s also finishing up a bartending course with her daughter.

“That way, when I am able to have my loungefront, I have everything that I need,” Stevens said. “I know how to run a kitchen; I know how to do everything in there.”

Sideya Sherman, director of NYCHA’s Resident Economic Empowerment and Sustainability programs, said the housing authority has been focusing of business development services for residents, as a way to increase residents’ income and access to work.

Sherman said the food business program was developed after focus groups found the industry was something many residents wanted to get into.

“The staff is pumped about the program,” Sherman said, adding NYCHA partnered with Small Business Services, the Economic Development Corporation, Hot Bread Kitchen and Citi Community Development for the classes. “It really weaves together the critical services a small business needs to get started.”

For Stevens, starting a business isn’t just for her, but for her three children.

“I’m paving the way for them, because if nothing else, I can leave them with something. It can be theirs,” Stevens said.