

# A New Chef Buzz— Puerto Rico!

**GIVE A MAN A FISH AND YOU FEED HIM FOR A DAY. TEACH A MAN TO FISH AND YOU FEED HIM FOR A LIFETIME! – A WISE CHINESE PROVERB AND IT’S IN THE FOREFRONT OF THE NEW YORK-BASED CULINARYCORPS FOUNDED BY CHEF CHRISTINE CARROLL.**

During the 2009 Christmas holiday, TCC solicited top chefs to contribute their culinary expertise for the benefit of “at risk” individuals in Puerto Rico.

Chef Carroll, a scientist who migrated to the culinary profession, sought a diverse team of chefs for the Puerto

Rico venture. To participate, each chef had to raise \$600 and flight costs.

Backed by members of The Beach Club of Santa Monica, CA and general manager Gregg Patterson, and armed with a plane ticket purchased by the club, I raised \$1200 from my major purveyors-sponsors. World Wide Produce, Santa Monica Seafood, LA Poultry, Preferred Foodservice, Swiss Chalet, Newport Meats, and Sysco Foods all generously contributed.

I’d never been to Puerto Rico so was full of curiosity as well as imagination.



**CHEF WHITNEY WERNER**  
EXECUTIVE CHEF  
THE BEACH CLUB

I knew, of course, that the TCC outing would take us to an island community quite rich in native culture and customs, but impoverished and less fortunate than stateside communities where most of us work and reside.

This was to be a soul-bonding adventure and experience for both the Puerto Ricans and the chefs – the right vision that came to life in many delightful and energizing circumstances. We selected as the ones most likely to benefit from our efforts.

## **DISTINCT CHALLENGES**

We became involved with “Bill’s Kitchen”, a full service HIV-AIDS sufferer’s support group and cooking facility on our first venture. The kitchen offers medical service as well as counseling and food supply, and saw first hand how a food-preparation facility was designed and operated to extend to basic human needs beyond meals. Obviously, this was a vast and highly memorable departure for most of us.

During our short visit, we focused on “trouble shooting” the scientific



**WHITNEY WERNER WITH WOMEN AT THE SHELTER**

recipes of “Bill’s Kitchen.” The kitchen had been receiving complaints regarding texture and quality when reheating the frozen foods. The dishes needed to be frozen in baggies without the use of blast chillers or vacuum packing machines and reheated by the users in boiling water, essentially “boil-in-a-bag,” or microwaved.

This posed considerable problems for creamed soups and rice dishes. Teams were devised to bring new items to the menu, find alternate ways of thickening soups and sauces as well as trying different ingredients for menu favorites that would have a higher tolerance to the freezing process.

Another day took us to the Albert Einstein High School Culinary Arts Program, located in one of San Juan’s poorest neighborhoods. What we found was joyful to say the least. The kids literally welcomed us with open arms.

It was an “all smiles” day of homemade pasta and bonding. Although the instructor at the school was obviously on the right track, we offered a new perspective and helped demonstrate that *they* could change their life and make a difference through cooking with their indigenous food options.

It was a very rewarding experience to share our training and insights into how the students could expand and grasp novel means to prepare delicious wholesome dishes using simple ingredients readily available.

## WOMEN’S SHELTER DAY

Another at a battered women and children’s shelter *happened to be the most emotionally challenging day of our visit.* For the safety of the women and children, the shelter is hidden and the actual whereabouts is known only to very few and law enforcement people because of the high domestic violence rate.

A very somber occasion, as we realized that the home was shelter to more children than we expected. We quickly discovered, to our relief, that the sad plight of these children didn’t deter their eagerness to engage us.

My partner for the day, Chef April Neujean is Chef Teacher for Edible Schoolyard as well as the Food and Nutrition Services Coordinator for Firstline Schools, Inc in New Orleans.

While April readied the ingredients for pizza making, I worked with the kids and keep them occupied until pizza time, by preparing and creating Quesadilla Salvadorena, a sweet and cheesy “blondie” baked sweet from El Salvador. Another low resistance concept so far as the children were concerned!

After sampling the sweets the kids helped me make a few batches of salt dough by hand and I asked each one to create something for their Mother to show them the buzz, the love and the glow...something they all needed badly! The kids showed a vast array of creativity crafting salt dough sculptures of hearts, snowmen and other imaginary creatures to make Mama proud.

To whet their appetites further, we used the remaining pre-dinner time to step outside in the 90<sup>F</sup> degree weather, and not without many laughs, fully dressed in chef garb, I played hopscotch!

Our last day took us to a side of the Island rich in African culture where we experienced the national dish of Puerto Rico “Sancocho.” In the village of Loiza, well-known and respected PR Chef Carmen Lydia (Viva) Rodriguez cooked lunch.



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Chef Rodriguez ‘wrote the book’ on the cuisine of Puerto Rico, particularly Loiza. Sancocho is a rich stew originally cooked with beef, but now often with pork, and many types of tubers. Originally brought over from Africa, tubers are the vegetables of choice for locals.

The use of tubers in Puerto Rican dishes is extensive including many types of taro, sweet potatoes and other various potatoes and root vegetables not often found in mainland U.S. markets. Lunch ended with Puerto Rican drum dancing and a touch of “moonshine rum!”

During a trip to the neighboring island of Vieques, we were thrilled to give young students (ages 2-5) their first taste of fresh spinach and roasted beets. We also worked with a group of drug addicts and prostitutes, in the midst of challenging recoveries.

This served as a reminder that whatever our routines back home, the world is filled with opportunity to brighten lives and instill ideas that, like cooking,

may offer a simple yet lasting alternative to the harsh existences that make up other countries.

Each blissful yet challenging day gave new meaning to why I became a chef. Even if it was tempered by the difficult realities posed by underprivileged communities, there’s immense opportunity to expose others to how the basics of cooking can be creative and fulfilling, and in the process observe a transformation of the spirit we all share.

The idea that you can add some new sparkle to these communities, and make a basic yet vital contribution through the application of culinary skills, is highly satisfying.

My reflection on the CulinaryCorps experience has changed my previous definition of “success.” It is neither the competition medals achieved nor the stripes on my chef coat. It is not the money in my bank account or the amount of “stuff” in my house.

*I realize that the true measure of my success is the connection made to a community.* My cooking skills and

teaching ability are merely the medium to do so.

The “high fives” from the three-year olds on Vieques is a tangible reward, made more magical because I shared them with complete strangers who embraced me with trust and received me with unadulterated love.

The unrestrained smiles of happiness on innocent children, whose lives have been traumatically jarred if not scarred and who find themselves burdened to escape battery or possible death, signify the deepest and most profound measures of “success.”

The group’s feeling was unanimous – a truly profound experience for organizers and participants alike.

The CulinaryCorps chefs all returned to their home kitchens with the Buzz, the Love, and the Glow!

*I realize that the true measure of my success is the connection made to a community.* Whether it’s my club community or a far off community, my cooking skills, teaching ability and “Level III Chef” embrace are merely the medium to do so. **BR**

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**WHITNEY WERNER WITH KIDS AT PASTA DAY**