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**Shared Use Kitchen Helps Food Entrepreneurs Get Started**

Starting a food business can be daunting. The cost of outfitting a commercial kitchen can be a barrier to food entrepreneurs and navigating state and federal regulations overwhelming.

The Mickle Center Shared Use Kitchen in the Sherman Hill neighborhood is a certified commercial kitchen available to rent on an as-need basis. Formerly a nursing home kitchen, the space was renovated in 2016 and designed to meet the needs of food entrepreneurs, chefs, caterers, bakers, and cooking class instructors.

Currently, about 20 food businesses use the Mickle Center space, selling products across multiple platforms including meal prep, retail, wholesale, direct-to-consumer, farmers market, catering and events. Many individuals who contact the Mickle Center Kitchen do not have extensive backgrounds or experience in the food industry, just an idea. Kitchen Manager Mary Kapler works directly with potential renters to become certified and state-licensed businesses as quickly as possible. Once approved, Kapler continues to work with the entrepreneurs as they develop their operations.

“As an affordable rental space, the Mickle Center kitchen has helped me grow my business and continue to expand by having the equipment I need. Mary has been a huge asset with helping guide me with professional advice as well,” commented Julie Heathcoat, owner of Sunflower Chef Catering.

Kapler cautions that being a food entrepreneur is not easy and it doesn’t happen overnight. “Many folks call and assume that they can just show up and start cooking.” Becoming certified, licensed and trained in using the kitchen space takes four weeks to several months.

Kapler notes that while the type of food businesses that rent space at the Mickle Center are quite diverse, she’s identified several elements successful food business owners share: a defined target consumer, an understanding of financials, ability to handle the unexpected, patience and a strong personal drive to see the process through.

For several years, the Mickle Center’s owner, the Neighborhood Investment Corporation, envisioned turning the outdated kitchen space into a vibrant shared use kitchen that would be available to food entrepreneurs in Des Moines. The NIC partnered with The Wallace Centers of Iowa to renovate and operate the shared space.

The Wallace Centers of Iowa’s two locations include the Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center in rural Orient and the Wallace House in Des Moines. Together, the two historic sites provide educational programs and community services, produce sustainably-grown fruits and vegetables, and offer locally-sourced meals. More information about the non-profit can be found at www.wallace.org.

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