



JULIA MALAKIE / LOWELL SUN

Cafe program manager Kassandra Berzins of Manchester, N.H., walks lunch and dinner cartons from UTEC to Element Care and the Recovery Cafe for those organizations to distribute to individuals in need of a healthy meal through UTEC's Madd Love Meals program.

UTEC hits meal milestone with 75,000 delivered

By Barry Scanlon
Correspondent

Agency's culinary program helping the food insecure

LOWELL — Durrell Mendes says UTEC saved his life. Now the 25-year-old is helping change lives.

Founded in 1999 in response to gang violence in Lowell, UTEC says its mission is to “ignite and nurture the ambition of our most disconnected young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.”

Giving back to the community furthers that mission.

A year ago, UTEC had to close its cafe on Warren Street because of the pandemic. At a crossroads, the organization pivoted to a new food distribution mission, the Madd Love Meals program. The program has been a huge success. CEO Gregg Croteau said UTEC re-

cently delivered its 75,000th meal.

“We know what we’re doing is making a change and making a difference in the community,” Mendes said. “I just love being able to bring people healthy, fresh food to eat.”

Mendes helps prep, box and distribute food for needy members of the community. He knows not everyone

is lucky enough to eat well every day. It wasn't long ago he was one of those people. Without guidance, Mendes began to slip through the cracks.

"My life was rough," he said. "I was in and out of jail."

He joined UTEC eight years ago.

"UTEC has changed my life. UTEC is my family. I've met great people at UTEC. People that I think are family," the gregarious Mendes said.

Mendes said the Madd Love Meals program has become his mission.

"It feels great. It's one of the best feelings. Hopefully what we're doing in the community is helping families," he said.

Once he had no dreams. Now Mendes is proud to say he'll soon begin taking classes at Middlesex Community College in hopes of becoming a dental assistant.

"He's the real deal," Croteau said.



UTEC members are heavily involved with the Madd Love Meals program, packing up boxes, making sandwiches, delivering the food and, in some cases, cooking.

"We're very proud of the work that we're doing here and very proud of the young adults," Croteau said. "It's



inspiring."

Within a two-week span last March, UTEC got hit with a double whammy. First, Lowell District Court moved out of the neighborhood, a big loss for the UTEC Cafe. Then the pandemic hit. Two weeks later, however, UTEC rallied. The organization was determined that its Culinary Education program would not be dropped. The Madd Love Meals program was born. UTEC was going to be a distributor of healthy food.

Now, 75,000 meals later, UTEC is excited about its future and the difference it can make in the Merrimack Valley.

"It brings a smile, for sure," Croteau said of the milestone. "It's a lot of meals. The need is huge."

UTEC was able to create the Madd Love Meals program thanks to funding from the city of Lowell and the Greater Lowell Community Foundation.

"UTEC has demonstrated an impressive adaptability since the ear-

liest days of the COVID-19 crisis and has succeeded in reimagining its services to support the evolving needs of the community," said Lowell City Manager Eileen Donoghue. "UTEC's work to deliver thousands of healthy, nutritious meals every week through the Madd Love Meals program is a remarkable example of how the organization has stepped up during this challenging time."

"Through the GLCF COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund, the foundation has continued support of UTEC's culinary workforce program for young adults throughout the pandemic," said Jay Linnehan, GLCF president & CEO. "GLCF funded a Madd Love Meals program expansion to provide meal delivery to food-insecure seniors in Dracut and Tyngsboro through the Councils on Aging. We are proud to partner with UTEC on addressing food insecurity in Greater Lowell."

Recently, UTEC, which also has offices in Lawrence and Haverhill, received a grant from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs to purchase two

refrigerated vans. Instead of renting, UTEC will soon have the vans at its disposal.

Being able to provide fresh, healthy and culturally appropriate meals has never been more important, said Chris Austin, UTEC's director of Food Enterprise.

"These guys are really passionate about the opportunity to be able to give back to their community," Austin said. "We're rolling now. I'm very proud of everything we've done here. Unfortunately, food in-

security doesn't look like it's going to go away any time soon."

UTEC is providing about 3,000 meals a month in Lowell. The organization works with some 170 young adults, ages 17-25, throughout the course of a year.

"I knew if we were going to do (the Madd Love Meals program) that we were going to be all in. It doesn't surprise me that we could hit that (75,000) number because of the members of our team," Croteau said.

The Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association also benefits from UTEC's food program.

"We are grateful for the food packages that UTEC has been providing. With their help, we are able to help families put food on their tables every week. Their ongoing commitment to our community members truly means a lot to us and we couldn't have done it with them," said Leakhena Vong, the Monorom Family Support Program coordinator.

