

Made with 'Madd Love'



TIM JEAN/Staff photos

UTEC Cafe program manager **Kassandra Berzins** helps prepare salads before they are added to meals that are packaged for delivery.

Group develops delivery service to fight hunger in Valley

BY ALLISON CORNEAU
acorneau@eagletribune.com

On a typical day before the pandemic, Chris Austin had plenty on his to-do list as the director of food enterprise for the Lowell-based UTEC organization.

The anti-violence group was operating several food-related programs including a cafe, event space and bustling catering business.

Once March 2020 arrived, however, everything changed.

“COVID hit and the bottom fell out — we had to shut everything down,” said Austin, a veteran food service worker with a resume that includes time at Whole Foods Market and Sweetgreen.

Tasked with keeping a group of staff members and young adults who worked in his kitchen safe from COVID-19 while dealing with the temporary pause of UTEC programming, Austin came up with an idea. Rather than stop accepting deliveries of food and other items that would be served at



Ginny Chhuon, left, and Chris Austin of UTEC load meals into a van for deliveries from the organization's cafe in Lowell.

for-profit functions, he and UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau created a delivery service called Madd Love Meals, which brings free groceries and prepared

meals to needy people in Haverhill, Lawrence and other Merrimack Valley communities.

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DELIVERY

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“The young adults we serve were in need of food assistance, so we started doing hybrid grocery boxes that included prepared meals to get these families through the early days of COVID,” said Austin, who has worked for three years at UTEC, an organization with a mission of discouraging young people from joining gangs by offering them productive work and education such as food service jobs and training. “It was wildly successful and we found out we were really good at it.

“It served a bunch of different purposes: It kept people fed with nutritious, culturally-appropriate meals, but it was also keeping people safe so that they weren’t jumping into a car with four other people or another family to go to Market Basket,” he said.

In July, Madd Love Meals began serving residents in cities that include Haverhill. Since that time, UTEC staff members have cooked and delivered between 1,200 and 1,800 meals each week to Haverhill residents, Austin said.

Croteau said Haverhill organizations working with Madd Love Meals include Emmaus, which operates homeless shelters; Community Action; the Council on Aging; and Leaving the Streets Ministries. Staff members at Cafe UTEC package the boxes and distribute them weekly to the community organizations, which then identify residents who need food.

Denise Arnold, volunteer and gifts-in-kind manager at Emmaus, said most of the meal boxes received by her organization go to families with small children or individuals who have no transportation to pick up their own groceries.

“These boxes have been a lifeline at providing healthy, nutritious meals, especially during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic,” Arnold said.

UTEC is also piloting the program in other cities across the Merrimack



TIM JEAN/Staff photos

This lemon pepper chicken salad with chips and feta cheese is among the meals made by the UTEC Cafe in Lowell for delivery to people in need.

Valley, and in some cases, distributes up to 2,500 meals each week.

Typical boxes can feed a single person for an entire week, Austin said. In addition to pantry staples like milk, pasta and cereal, each box also comes with one or two prepared meals. Recently, a hearty, heat-and-eat chicken and risotto dish was included.

“We’re trying to make meals that are geared toward adult stomachs and adult palates,” said Austin, who aims to fill the gap for local people unable to receive food from school-based meal programs or food banks. “We’re using wholesome ingredients and cooking from scratch. Everything is super healthy.”

In addition to being packed with UTEC’s signature — “madd love” — each box is customized with items unique to the community it serves.

“The Council on Aging in Haverhill has clients who are mostly Latino, so those foods are ones Latinos recognize: Sweet potatoes and the same fresh fruits and veggies they stock in their kitchens,” Austin said. “We want to make sure people have food they’re comfortable with and used to eating.”

Funded in large part through CARES Act money from Mayor James Fiorentini and donations



UTEC Cafe chef David Eibelbach packages a brown rice dish while preparing meals for delivery.

from businesses including Pentucket Bank and Cedars Foods, the program has benefits beyond the kitchen.

“The young adults working with us are getting experience making real food,” Austin said. “They’re not slapping together 2,000

peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or dealing cheese out on bread. As the youth learn about food insecurity, it makes what they do much more tangible. It’s making food you love for people like you — and that’s such important work.”