

Charleston Gazette-Mail | Print



COVENANT HOUSE | Courtesy photo

Area chefs participating in the 2015 Chef's Challenge fundraiser for the Covenant House of Charleston work to plate a course. This year's Chef's Challenge will be held April 5 at the Charleston Civic Center. Tickets cost \$100 per person.

Seven area "celebrity" chefs will be rubbing elbows April 5 for the Covenant House of Charleston's sixth annual Chef's Challenge fundraiser dinner.

Now before you walk into the Charleston Civic Center's South Hall expecting to see a challenge, there are a few things you should know about the nonprofit's largest fundraiser.

By "challenge" they don't mean a challenge between chefs to win over the taste buds of diners — although they hope to do that, too. There will be no whisk dueling, no arguments over who can plate the fastest.

The challenge is less about the people and more about the food. Since the Covenant House's food pantry helps to provide meals to approximately 10,000 people living in the Charleston area over the course of 12 months, according to Ellen Allen, the executive director, Covenant House decided to challenge the chefs by asking them to prepare a gourmet meal using food typically found in a food pantry.

Luckily for the chefs, and thanks to a variety of donors who regularly give to the pantry, almost anything can be found on its shelves.

"We could have filet mignon in our food pantry. We could have shrimp," Allen said. "And sometimes we could have no meat, but we are always really well stocked. It's truly a gourmet meal."

This year's menu includes tomato bisque. Salad Javi — with baby garden salad greens wrapped in an English cucumber, garnished with confetti peppers, diced vine ripe tomatoes and finished with a citrus vinaigrette — will follow. Chef Tim Urbanic, owner of Cafe Cimino, will be making Shrimp Limoncello for the appetizer.

The entree will be led by Chef Anne Hart, owner of Provence Market Café in Bridgeport. She'll be preparing a Pot-Au-Feu, a French beef stew with carrots, turnips, leeks and cabbage.

Chef John Wright of Bridge Road Bistro in Charleston will add his Fondant potatoes as a side dish. The dessert will be a vanilla Panna cotta, an Italian dessert of sweetened cream thickened with gelatin.

In addition to Hart, Urbanic and Wright, the four other participating chefs include: Chef Isabel Cross of 21 at the Frederick Hotel in Huntington; Chef Dennis Harris of Edgewood Country Club in Charleston; Chef Todd Jones of the Charleston Civic Center; and Chef Paul Smith of Charleston's Buzz Foods.

When the dinner started six years ago, ticket sales topped out at 100. These days they are selling upward of 400 tickets, Allen said. The chefs will begin work at 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 5 to prepare for the large meal. Not only are the chefs donating their time, they are donating all of the food that will be served, which is a "huge donation," Allen said.

Chef Urbanic has participated in the fundraiser in recent years. The reason he keeps volunteering, Urbanic said, is knowing that Convent House's services place a large emphasis on battling hunger.

"Because we're in the food and hospitality business, I almost can't stand to think that anybody wouldn't have food," Urbanic said.

In addition to its choice food pantry, which allows families to shop around like a grocery store and pick out food they know they will eat, the Covenant House offers a number of services to help address homelessness and to assist vulnerable populations in the Kanawha Valley.

In 2015, more than 32,000 people visited the Covenant House's Drop-In Center, located at its headquarters at 600 Shrewsbury St. in Charleston, according to its annual program tally. The Drop-In Center serves as a day shelter for the homeless, provides free showers and laundry facilities and works to connect people to helpful health and/or housing services. The center offers clothing and hygiene products to its visitors.

In addition, Allen said, they currently have 54 people who once were homeless now living in permanent housing.

"There's another 600 that get some form of assistance to help them remain in their homes," she said.

"When people are living on the edge, if they miss work for a couple of weeks due to an illness, they could get an eviction notice. We can fill in the gaps by paying utility bills, providing food."

Half of the Covenant House's \$1.3 million annual budget comes from the community, Allen said. The Chef's Challenge fundraiser is the nonprofit's largest.

"This event has become an essential element to meeting the needs of truly our most vulnerable citizens in Charleston," Allen said.

The Covenant House's sixth annual Chef's Challenge fundraiser dinner will be held Tuesday, April 5. The doors will open at 5:30 p.m. at the Charleston Civic Center. Tickets cost \$100 per person.

In addition to enjoying a gourmet meal that includes free wine and beer, attendees can participate in a silent and live auction. They can also buy raffle tickets, which are \$10 a piece, to bid on an original piece of metal artwork made specially for the event by Alderson, West Virginia artist Mark Blumenstein. The raffle winner will be announced at the event.

For more information visit www.wvcovenanthouse.org or call Angie Douglas, development coordinator and executive administrative assistant for the Covenant House of Charleston, at 304-344-8053, ext. 22.

Reach Anna Patrick at anna.patrick@wvgazette.com or 304-348-4881.