

'Hell's Kitchen' contestant talks food with YTI students

Sunday News
Jul 01, 2012 00:14
Lancaster



Barbie Marshall talks about her experiences on the reality...

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Staff Writer

Stepping into "Hell's Kitchen" wasn't Barbie Marshall's idea — it was prompted by a dare from her kids.

After auditioning and getting a spot on the Fox television reality cooking show, she said it's now on her kids to make the next move.

"I told them I would try out for the show, as long as they would follow their dreams," the 34-year-old Strasburg resident said.

Into its 10th season, "Hell's Kitchen" is hosted by chef Gordon Ramsay and features professional chefs competing for a head chef position at his Gordon Ramsay Steak restaurant in the Paris Hotel in Las Vegas. The show airs at 8 p.m. Mondays.

Describing the television experience as chaotic at times, Marshall took time out from the series Thursday to speak to culinary students at York Technical Institute of Lancaster.

Marshall, a Philadelphia native, said she joined the show without having worked in a restaurant kitchen for three years. Though she has been an executive chef, Marshall said her experiences mean nothing on the show.

"He's looking for who he is looking for," she said, referring to Ramsay.

She started in the culinary world at age 14, after her father, Malcolm McRay, a retired Philadelphia police officer, died. A friend and former police partner of her father, Vincent Cunningham, hired her to work at the Ritz Hall catering facility in Philadelphia.

Marshall said she was catering weddings for 150 people by herself by age 15.

It wasn't until she had children and was married that she thought about going back to school, said Marshall, noting that cooking came naturally to her.

"If I was going to be spending money on getting a degree, I might as well do something I love doing," she said.

Marshall enrolled in Johnson & Wales University's culinary program. Her first day there was the same day her Navy husband, John, was deployed to the Mediterranean to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. She said the first nine months of school were tough because she was juggling classes, family responsibilities and a part-time job.

But times got tougher.

On leave from the Navy, Marshall's husband was killed in Philadelphia in 2007 while trying to break up a fight between his brother and another man, she said. Her children watched as their father was shot.

Marshall, the mother of four children aged 13, 15, 18 and 20, moved to Strasburg after her husband died.

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Her children have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, she said, so Marshall is homeschooling the younger two.

Those challenging times were good training for "Hell's Kitchen," she said. While speaking to the class, Marshall didn't sugarcoat details about working in the culinary industry. The routine, she noted, will keep them from many social occasions.

"My social life is my family," she said.

For the students who attended the demonstration, she was an inspiration. Shante Rosario, 25, of Lancaster, appreciated Marshall's attitude about life.

"It was encouraging to listen to her, because I want to [cook] one day," Rosario said.

While making a light summer salad of watermelon, feta cheese, salad greens and red snapper, Marshall offered kitchen tips such as pressing down on the fish cooking in the pan so it is sure to heat evenly.

Marshall works at Green Meadow Farm in Gap, which provides produce for restaurants in Lancaster and Philadelphia, while attending to her business, S.O.O.P. Catering in Philadelphia. In her spare time, she is a consultant for Han Dynasty restaurants in Philadelphia.

Marshall says that life is what you make it.

"It's always about how much you put into your work," she said to the students. "You can be what you want to be."

• A viewing party for a "Hell's Kitchen" episode will be held at 7:30 p.m. Monday, July 9, at Penn Square Grille, 2 E. King St. The event is open to the public. Marshall will be in attendance to answer questions and give autographs. Food and drinks inspired by Marshall will be served as well. Those attending must be age 21 or older.

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