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Starting from scratch

The chefs at Village Kitchen in L.A. -- some just out of prison, others recently homeless -- have been given a chance to succeed.

July 25, 2008 | Scott Gold | Times Staff Writer

Not long after Felicia Cuellar started working at The Village Kitchen, she began to suspect that the purple potatoes she'd been roasting had been dyed. The red carrots, too. Aren't carrots supposed to be orange?

Indeed, most everything she knew about food she'd learned from the drive-thru. She didn't know the proper way to hold a knife, much less how to distribute butter in batches of scone batter to keep them from spreading out like pancakes in the oven.

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From her first day, however, Cuellar was an expert on the scale. She was so good, she barely needed one. Whatever the recipe called for -- 11 ounces of flour, 14 ounces of powdered sugar -- she'd squint one eye, size up her target, plop it on the scale and, more often than not, come pretty darn close. That's because back home in Lancaster, she'd used the same kind of scale for years. "To weigh dope," she said.

If you like your sandwich with a nice story on the side, think about stopping in at the new storefront cafe at 1667 Beverly Blvd., just northwest of downtown Los Angeles.

The cafe is the latest project of the Good Shepherd Center for Homeless Women and Children. Over the last 25 years, the organization has provided thousands with food, clothes, housing and counseling, all under the steady hand of Sister Julia Mary Farley, its founder and a saintly sort in local social work circles.

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Homeless -- Women

Good Shepherd occupies nearly an entire block in a stretch of town otherwise peppered with cheap motels, union halls and laundries. Its latest addition is a \$13-million building with 21 transitional apartments -- and this tiny cafe.

The cafe is staffed by 10 women, nine of them mothers, all of them recently homeless, imprisoned or both. There are former addicts, dealers, thieves and old-fashioned down-on-their-luckers -- some of whom have eaten out of garbage cans -- being trained in classic cuisine and, on the best days, learning to love themselves again.

"This is the answer," said B.J. Daniels, 51, a single mother who grew up in Long Beach and had a stable life until a transportation company furloughed her job three years ago amid budget cuts.

Daniels stayed with relatives as long as she could, and then, out of options, landed at Good Shepherd. This summer, she signed up for a work program at The Village Kitchen, undergoing 80 hours of wage-free training. Now fully employed, she hopes to introduce some of her family recipes, including seafood gumbo, to the menu.

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