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UA student serves up nutritional knowledge to agency clients

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POSTED: 11:34 a.m. EDT, Apr 14, 2010

University of Akron senior Katherine Fricke was armed with a wealth of knowledge about eating well when she set out a month ago to perform her senior internship.

Something was missing.

She readily admits she was lacking in confidence about her ability to relate that information when she found out her assignment was with the nonprofit agency Choices and her students would be the agency's mental health consumers.

"I didn't even know what Choices was until I went on the Internet," Fricke said. "And when I did find out, I was nervous. I had never been to any place like that before, and I had no idea of what to expect, or if I could be effective with this group."

Three weeks later, Fricke has gotten her answer.

"The whole experience has been awesome," she said. "Coming to Choices has changed my entire view on mental health. I'm hoping to change their views on nutritional eating."

Choices is a nonprofit agency created to provide social, recreational, informational and educational services for adults who are receiving mental health services in Summit County.

Executive Director Sheila White believes Fricke already has had a dynamic effect on a great number of the 305 active Choices members.

"Katherine already is changing the lives of people for the better in less than a month," White said. "One of the most important factors in quality of life for mental health consumers is nutrition."

White said the average life expectancy for people with mental health issues is nearly nine years less than for the general population in America.

"Our mental health consumers simply don't eat well," White said. "Katherine is taking big steps for us to change all of that. And she's done a great job already in less than a month."

The first thing Fricke did was install a bulletin board that all of the agency's members could view. The Make Healthy Choices bulletin board gives tips and fun ideas on how members can improve their lives by eating better on a daily basis.

"I wanted to spark awareness — both about nutrition and that we had this new program and class," said Fricke, who is on course to graduate in May and become a registered dietitian.

"I'm only there on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays for about five hours each day, but the bulletin board is there all day, every day," she said.

"It works as a constant reminder to the people about how important nutrition is in their lives. And it serves to give important information to them about how they can change their eating habits and their lives for the better."

Fricke also designs fliers that are passed out in the building to the members. And she works with staff and kitchen workers to design more nutritious lunches that are served free each day to an average of more than 60 members. She also is compiling a recipe book for members.

Last week, Fricke initiated what she believes will be the most important contribution she will make during her three-month tenure: the Tuesday morning class that runs from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. The first class attracted five members; attendance at the second more than doubled, to 12.

Six more sessions are scheduled.

"It's really not a class like you would have at the University of Akron," Fricke said. "It's very informal.

"But the goals are the same. I want people here to realize that nutrition is very important to their lives. I teach the members how to read labels and what the ingredients mean."

Fricke said they then can utilize that information in the everyday choices they make at the grocery store.

"I try to make everything fun and educational at the same time. I want the ones who have been there to come back and I want them to tell others what a great class it is so that we can grow. There is really no limit to the size of the class," she said.

White said bringing in Fricke has convinced her even more that UA can provide tremendous resources for the community. She credits Choices Program Director Paul Kuhn, who earned a master's in public administration from UA, with creating the hookup with the university.

"Katherine has been an absolutely perfect fit for what we needed," White said. "She has a great personality and has great information and great ideas.

"This has been a very good experience. We'll definitely go back the University of Akron to get more resources in the future. The relationship with the university has been outstanding, as have the resources."

The experience also has enabled Fricke to expand options for her career.

"Coming here has changed my perceptions on a lot of things," Fricke said. "I had never considered working with this population before.

"But just in a short time at Choices, it has opened my eyes that this could be a possible career choice. I could see myself working in wellness and nutrition along with doing counseling and running classes for large groups."

Anyone 18 or older who is receiving mental health services from a licensed provider is eligible to join Choices. People interested in joining or volunteering can call 330-762-8151 or go to <http://www.choicesakr.com>.

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