

Volunteer Voices

LIFE IN THE KITCHEN

by Gill Nichol

My life in the kitchen began, like that of so many young children, standing on a kitchen chair, watching and helping mum by dipping into and scraping out the cake mix or rolling out the pastry scraps and making them into sugar cookies.

And, so, 30 years whizzed by, years studded with many happy hours in the kitchen, including several stints working as a volunteer cook at student Christian conferences until, until..... Until one Saturday evening in February 2001 when Julie Robinson asked me to help out, as a one-off (washing-up) volunteer for the ASLAN Entertainment evening then headed up by Chris Peacock.

Julie and I had been friends for years and, knowing I was at a loose end and ASLAN was short of volunteers, she asked me to come along that fateful evening. I began with a bit of veg chopping; a bit of washing up and then Chris called an impromptu meeting to discuss which team members would be doing what. I'm not exactly sure what happened but ten minutes later I found myself volunteering to head up Chris's kitchen team permanently. There are four Entertainment teams and each team works on a one in four rota so, from washing up for a single evening, I found myself committed to cooking for 60 hungry men once a month!

Four years on and here I still am (although just about to take a break for a few months) and, the auspicious beginning aside, what else can I tell you about life in the Clubhouse kitchen?

I really like cooking so have enjoyed planning the menus and introducing a few more unusual dishes. Most popular has been kedgeree, which I tried once, despite expressed misgivings from a certain Mr Peacock, and have never looked back. The chaps (and ladies) love it and it has become a requested favourite. And, of course, the kitchen team love it too because it's simple and quick. The other lazy cook's favourite is quiche, new potatoes and salad. It never fails to please and the simplicity of it was a lesson well learnt for this would-be Nigella Lawson who prides herself on not doing 'shop bought'. In fact, the cooking from scratch 'just like mother' has almost been my undoing on several occasions. I re-learned that bulk cooking always takes longer than you think. Peeling and chopping onions for 60? Allow about an hour. Grating carrots for the world's largest carrot cake? Get Julie Robinson to help! And, when baking rice pudding in large catering dishes allow at least four hours (luckily I was doing this at home, so literally had all night... which was a good thing!) My most infamous menu planning error was probably the 'dinner party' we held at All Souls where I ambitiously decided to serve home-made meatballs. A family favourite and just that bit different? I

had to cajole almost every volunteer into the kitchen to help grate, stir, pound, and shape... and then I almost set the kitchen on fire browning them.... Then there was the evening where we had to all but dismantle the cooker to light the ovens; the one where I burnt several pans so badly that we had shifts of volunteers armed with brillo pads trying to restore the cookware to its former glory and another (Christmas) meal where someone inadvertently turned off an oven full of turkey.

And I have also learnt that, although the guests enjoy themed meals the cooks may not. (Leaders take note!) The night of the Athens Olympic Party was one I'd rather not repeat: vivid memories of praying over the 10 pints of cheese sauce - willing it to thicken - come flooding back every now and again! (For the record, it took over an hour and I shudder at the thought of how much cornflour we added - definitely not at all like the one mother makes!)

Mishaps aside, and there have probably been two or three evenings where the heat really has almost been too much and I longed to be somewhere - anywhere - else, I can genuinely say that I have looked forward to, and enjoyed, almost all of my evenings in the kitchen. It's not only a lot of fun, it's also tremendously rewarding feeding the guests, knowing that they're getting a tasty nutritious dinner, and knowing that you have been instrumental in making it happen. I still get a buzz out of serving up and of course, like any kitchen team, we love the compliments.

Cooking for others connects you with them in a very fundamental way: it signifies practical caring. Being in the kitchen, preparing the food has given me a defined role that I treasure and feel comfortable with. Over my kitchen counter I have had some excellent chats with several of our guests. Conversations that start with 'what's for dinner?' can end up in some surprising places, and I feel all the richer for having had them.



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