

When Tyrone Wilkens built his own smoker as part of his high school exit project, he never imagined he would be using that same smoker - not to mention his years of culinary experience - to please the taste buds of Valley View Senior Life (Junction City) residents years later.

Wilkens has been the director of dining and hospitality at Valley View for three years, and throughout that time, he has focused on bringing the residents the comfort food they crave while still opening their palates to new flavors.

This desire to encourage exploration may come from Wilkens' own background. After reading "Lord of the Flies" in high school, he said he enjoyed a scene in which the children ate shish kabobs on the island and decided to use it as inspiration for his senior exit project.

Wilkens built a smoker from old parts he found, making the cooking device's axle out of a football goal post. He then used the smoker to demonstrate to his class the cooking from the book. But, the smoker's purpose wasn't yet finished.

When he went to college at K-State, he made a deal with local grocery stores in Manhattan to sell them smoked meat as a way to pay for college. Once his talent was realized, he said, his career took off.

After working for K-State's housing and dining services, Wilkens trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, Calif., along with Rich Product Corporation in Buffalo, N.Y. After owning a steak house bar and grill in western Kansas for several years, Wilkens and his trusty smoker came to Valley View.

Wilkens still uses the smoker to cook for the Valley View residents, but there are many other culinary tricks he uses as well. Perhaps most importantly is his insistence that the residents get the foods they want.

"When new residents come in, I ask them, 'What are you hungry for?'" said Wilkens. "They choose the menu and it creates some comfort for them. Food experiences are very important in long-term care. They're really open to experimenting."

At Valley View, residents in both assisted living and independent living suites receive meals that are

carefully crafted by Wilkens at the request of the residents. Assisted living residents eat in one of four dining rooms on the facility, and independent living residents eat in Valley View's on-site restaurant, Estates Restaurant.

The restaurant features a full menu packed with Italian, barbecue, Mexican, Caribbean and comfort food. It also boasts "breakfast by design," through which residents can create their own breakfast platter, along with sandwiches, desserts and salads. Specialty beverages are also offered, like smoothies.

Valley View also offers a full-service catering line, which is available to residents, their families and the public. This is especially helpful when family members come to visit a resident and traveling is difficult.

"It makes this campus very unique because the family can pick what food they would like to eat and they don't have to get mom or dad out," said Wilkens.

The public is welcome to use Valley View's catering, and as long as something is being ordered off the menu, the facility's community room can be used at no cost. Wilkens said his staff frequently caters for Bridge groups, family functions, Lions Club events and engagement parties.

To decide what will go on both the restaurant menu and health care meals, Wilkens holds a food council with the residents once a month to talk about what they would like to have for meals and snacks.

"It's all driven by their choices," he said. "We work with the cultures of our residents, because it's a very diverse population. We bring that culture into Valley View while keeping a traditional menu."

The menu changes every five weeks, as well as with the seasons. Along with the traditional foods of their respective cultures, Wilkens said he also brings in things he enjoys cooking, like Israeli couscous, grilled chicken breast with strawberry sauce and his specialty, root beer baked beans.

Wilkens and his dining staff will also be treating the residents to smoked prime rib at the facility's Christmas party - using his trademark smoker - along with individual chicken cordon bleu and a green bean appetizer.



TYRONE WILKENS cooks up a meal at the Valley View Senior Life center in Junction City.

"This is a generation that cooked everything from scratch, so they have a good understanding of food quality," said Wilkens. "It gives us a good standard to live up to."

To keep the residents satisfied, along with providing valuable nutrition, Wilkens and his staff also cook most of their food from scratch, including meatloaf, lasagna and salads. They also use fresh fruits and fresh herbs whenever possible.

Homemade food always tastes better, Wilkens said, but it can also lower levels of sodium and sugar in foods.

"Proper nutrition is important in every diet, but it is especially important in the diets of the elderly," he said. "Proper protein intake for the elderly is important in the prevention of skin breakdown."

To assist with the nutrition of the residents' diets, Valley View employs a full-time dietary manager and a dietician who come in when needed.

Wilkens and the dining staff at Valley View cook for about 150 meals a day, plus employee meals. Cooking for this many different dietary needs can be a challenge, both from a budgetary and production standpoint, but Wilkens said he adapts what he learned cooking for many students at K-State's housing and dining.

Because food costs have increased by as much as 30 percent recently, Wilkens said the Valley View dining staff is careful to utilize everything to the fullest extent by using techniques like proper portion size and standardized recipes.

In the future, Wilkens said he would like to develop dietary consulting for not only the residents, but to educate the community as well. He also plans on continuing to develop the menu and set up programs to promote kitchen safety.

Between developing programs, trying new recipes and researching how to best keep the residents of Valley View full and satisfied with their meal choices, Wilkens wears many hats. Hanging from his coat rack are both a business and a chef's jacket.

Donning the chef's attire, complete with white hat, Wilkens walks toward the Estates Restaurant kitchen, stopping frequently to share a laugh with residents, whom he calls by name.

"This is the best part of my job, building a relationship with the residents," said Wilkens, with a smile. "They have such a rich history, and it's great to be a part of that."

By Megan Molitor, The Daily Union, Junction City, Kan. Article and photo used by permission of The Daily Union.

Junior high girls host the Huskies

On Monday, Dec. 13, the Cheylin Junior High Lady Cougars hosted the Northern Valley Huskies.

B-team Northern Valley

The B-girls took to the court first. At halftime, Cheylin led 15-11. They outscored us in the fourth quarter on a couple of long passes for baskets and won the nail-bitter, 22-21.

"It was a disappointing loss for the Cougars, but we were very pleased with the performance," Coach Dan Carson said.

Danea Magnani led the Cougars with 9 points and also had 10 rebounds and six steals. Elizabeth Keltz added 6 points with two rebounds, three steals, and two impressive blocked shots. Alexis Frink, Elsa Craig Burr, and Diana Garcia all had 2 points. Alexis had eight steals, Elsa Craig had four rebounds and six steals, and Diana had two rebounds. Kelsey Miller grabbed four rebounds while Haleigh Rucker had two.

"It was disappointing to lose by one point and to only make one of 10 free throws," Coach Carson said. "The girls played hard and their press looked very good."

A-team Northern Valley

In the next game, the A-team girls played a much taller Husky team. It too, was a close game all the way through. At halftime, the Cougars trailed 14-17.

"We took the lead in the third quarter 24-21, and at the end of the game the Cougars won 29-25," Coach Carson said. "Kalin Ritchey scored 16 points and had four rebounds and seven steals. Allie Frisbie added 10 points with seven rebounds and three steals. Mary Anne Orten scored 3 points and added five rebounds and five steals. Jaime Davison got three rebounds and two steals, while Diana Garcia got three rebounds, and Elizabeth Keltz grabbed two rebounds."

"We were very impressed at the level of play of the ladies," Coach Carson said. "We only

had 18 turnovers in the game. We worked on press and press break a lot since the last game, and both looked really looked good. It is great to play such a close game and to come out on top.

A-team Hitchcock County

The next night, the Cougars traveled to Trenton, Neb., to play Hitchcock County. This time the A-team played first.

"We saw some fatigue from playing so hard the day before," Coach Carson said. "At halftime, the Cougars led 13-5. Cheylin came out on top with the score 29-9."

Allie Frisbie was the top scorer for Cheylin with 12 points, with eight rebounds and six steals. Mary Anne Orten scored 10 points and added four rebounds. Jaime Davison scored 3 points, grabbed eight rebounds, and had three block shots. Kalin Ritchey scored 2 points and had three rebounds. Diana Garcia added 2 points. Elizabeth Keltz had 10 rebounds while Danea Magnani got four.

"We had a sluggish first half, but were able to get a lot of steals and capitalize on them in the second," said Coach Carson. "This was a nice win for the Cougars."

B-team Hitchcock County

In the second game, the B-team played two quarters with a running clock, because of sickness and injury for the other team. At the end of the first quarter, Hitchcock County led 4-2. Cheylin lost 2-11.

"What a fast game!" Coach Carson said.

Kelsey Miller scored 2 points early in the game, and Cheylin wasn't able to score again. Danea Magnani had two rebounds and Alexis Frink had two steals.

"We had quite a few shots under the basket, but couldn't get them to fall" said Coach Carson. "We also appeared to be a little fatigued in the game. Both Cheylin girl's teams go into Christmas break with records of 3-4.

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