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## Food for Thought

By Ilyse Simon | Photos by Roy Gumpel



Diane Reeder, founder of the Queen's Galley, with Microsoft founder Bill Gates after winning a Microsoft "Start Something Amazing" award.

The windows of 319 Wall Street evoke quizzical gazes. Medieval capes, frocks, and tunics hang in the storefront, hovering over a random car seat and a smattering of toddler's toys. It's not every day one sees a dame with corseted bosom and velvet garb strolling through uptown Kingston, so what's a store like this doing here? Peeking out from under a red velvet cloak is the gatekeeper of this establishment, Olivia. Sippy cup in hand—Olivia is two—the folds of velvet and leather are her playground. Knightly Endeavors is a renaissance clothing company owned by Jay Reeder, landlord of the Queens Galley and husband to its founder, Diane Reeder, a determined, ebullient, out-of-work mother of three—goldfish crackers in one hand and PC in the other.

The word "galley" refers to a kitchen. The Queens Galley is a nonprofit organization providing awareness, education, relief, and prevention of food insecurity. As the American Institute of Nutrition defines it, food insecurity "exists whenever the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain." Reeder explains, "In 'real' terms, food-insecure households experience difficulty keeping the lights on, paying housing and heating costs, and trying to put balanced meals on the table at the same time."

The name of the charity was created with a medieval flavor in deference to her husband's generosity in bankrolling her dream, and relinquishing a couch and a corner of his store for some makeshift office space. Reeder's blood visibly simmers with excitement as she speaks about her 80-hour work-week, from school nutrition projects to solving senior diet dilemmas. "I get a high doing programs with kids and talking one on one with seniors, teaching people about affordable foods."



Reeder with a bowl of red beans at JFK Elementary School in Kingston.

Schooling latchkey kids on creative snacks that are affordable, nutritious, and easy to make, and pairing with seniors coping with ever-changing medical and financial dietary restrictions, the Queens Galley works with chefs and nutritionists to provide appropriate menu ideas. From recipe adaptations that compensate for lean cupboards to cooking techniques that boost nutrition, her tales sound like a working class reality show where there are four things in the fridge and you have 15 minutes to make an appealing dinner for five.

A native of Far Rockaway, Queens, Reeder comes from a family with a biological destiny to feed people. "With an Italian mother, Irish Catholic father, and raised by my Jewish stepmother, it's a recipe for frugality, guilt, and the need to feed lots of people and have fun." Kitchens were a welcoming place, where even the youngest child had a job in food preparation. On any given Sunday, the day would be spent kneading and rolling dough as a clan, preparing the evening meal. "Opening a box of pasta wasn't a thought that existed in our household when preparing a ravioli dinner," says Reeder. "It's common sense, if you cook with your kids then they won't be out spray painting walls and getting into trouble."

Reeder never went to formal cooking school. Some kids lifeguard or get retail jobs for the summer; Reeder spent her spring breaks, holidays, and weekends cooking with her dad, the Irish foodie, and her grandfather, executive chef at a French restaurant. Graduating from Binghamton in 1987, Reeder returned to what she knew best—food. From managing the Friendly's restaurant in New Paltz to opening Pancake Hollow Chocolates in Highland, Reeder has always found her home in the kitchen.



Part of a Mardi Gras educational event on nutritious food.

While the theory behind the Queens Galley workshops began decades ago, the realization that it should be structured into a nonprofit organization took place in late spring of 2002. She approached a few close friends to help form a board of directors and chose a name in 2003. "I had plans to run workshops on weekends and evenings, and keep my clerical job during the weekdays. The Queens Galley was permitted to use kitchen space generously donated by the Trinity Lutheran Church [in Kingston], and my long-suffering husband was coerced by cookie bribery to allow us to use office space at his retail shop," says Reeder. Pastor Robert Harris of Trinity Lutheran says letting the Galley use their space "is a wonderful thing. For over a year now, the building has been used for outreach in teaching folks how to use foods on the WIC list [Women Infant and Children supplemental food program]. One of the benefits is that we always get to eat what is made."

Between her husband's fluctuating seasonal business and her noncompensatory work

with the Galley, Reeder and her family have weathered financially stressed times. She is practiced in the frugal culinary tips she espouses to others. "There have been times when our grocery budget plummeted to \$25 every two weeks for a family of five," Reeder admits. She lives what she preaches. "However, there will always be new foods on the table. I take advantage of cost saving strategies like the farmers market, where you can buy one carrot, and where seasonal food is cheaper."

The Kingston Farmer's market brings grower and consumer together, dramatically shortening the expanse between farm and table. But what if part of your food budget comes from food stamps? Farmers were previously able to take paper food stamps, but with the implementation of the electronic benefit transfer (EBT) system, individual farms are not equipped to process cards. While decreasing the stigma of food stamp usage, the "swipe" system severed the link between farmer and consumer. This is exactly the type of situation that Reeder dreams about solving.

The Queens Galley is attempting to bridge this gap. Starting in June—and pending USDA approval—the Queens Galley will run a table each Saturday at the Kingston market. "If the USDA approves the program, the Galley will be able to swipe a shopper's food stamp card and exchange that credit for tokens they can use at any stall in the market. Even farmers who are not registered with the USDA food stamp program can take these tokens, sell their eligible produce, and redeem them for cash at the end of the day at our booth," says Reeder. "The Galley receives no money for this. It is simply consistent with the mission to eliminate food insecurity and help bridge the gap for nutritious food from soil to table." The Galley is also an approved prescreening site for the food stamp program. It is open on Saturdays and available evenings, when the thought of taking time from the regular workweek to apply for food stamps is not an option. The Galley will guide families through the bureaucratic maze until the application process is complete.

With workshops given in schools, churches, and social service agencies across Dutchess, Orange, Ulster, Albany, and Nassau counties, Reeder gathers food-service professionals, marketing executives, and financial supporters to volunteer through word-of-mouth and the Web. This past November, Reeder was one of five people nationwide to win the Microsoft "Start Something Amazing" award, given for her ability to use technology in unique and innovative ways while pursuing her passion. The Galley relies heavily on the Internet to find, screen, and communicate with volunteers, access USDA nutrition analysis tools, and outreach to masses. She met privately with Bill Gates, won a \$5,000 technology package of goodies from Microsoft, and spent a day filming, when Microsoft created a five-minute video marketing tool for the Galley.

So what propels Reeder to continue with lack of funds, no proper office, and while looking for a part-time job of her own? "I get a feeling of satisfaction, and joy, teaching people about food," says Reeder. "I feel satisfied when a third-grader in Hannaford's runs over to tell me how she can find so many green and red foods in the produce aisle just like she learned from the new food pyramid. Or when a participant from a teen shelter was inspired by a workshop and now wants a career in food service. Watching these kids give back to the community makes me feel giddy. And, I feel it is imperative to teach my daughters by example that no effort is too small, and by combining their efforts with their peers they can create change."

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The Queens Galley is located at 319 Wall Street, Kingston. [www.thequeensgalley.org](http://www.thequeensgalley.org).

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