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Sight-impaired kids make pizzas and dessert on cooking show

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Critters and beasts usually get the spotlight at ZooMiami. But on a recent Thursday, four visually impaired kids stole the show.

Alondra Roldan, 14 and Peterson Simon, 16, both of Miami; and Juan Pablo Paniagua, 12, of Doral and Daniela Ghunaim, 12, of Aventura were the stars of the day during a live location shoot for the cable television show, *Cooking Without Looking*.

The show focuses on teaching people with little or no vision how to fend safely in the kitchen. Meanwhile, said executive producer Renee Rentmeester, the program shows the sighted that the blind are more able than disabled.

The main dish: pizza made with biscuit dough, jar tomato sauce and pre-shredded mozzarella cheese. Cooking time was monitored by a 12-inch round clock with raised numbers. Cooks used oven mitts that covered their arms past the elbow.

The dessert: mud pie with worms - also known more deliciously as chocolate pudding with crushed Oreo cookies topped with candy gummy worms.

“For all you sighted people out there, you just saw a bunch of blind kids do something you never thought we could,” said Juan Pablo, his eyes aimed straight at the camera behind his dark glasses.

“We just proved you wrong,” Juan Pablo told the audience.

All of the students attend public schools plus additional classes at Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, which helps prepare teenagers and young adults to live independently.

Cooking, living space organization and using technology are among the skills taught. Job training, work experience, bill-paying and building resumes for the future are also included.

“A blind person can do everything a sighted person can do. The process is not the same — there may be adjustments or modifications — but they can do it,” said Carol Brady, chief programs officer for center.

Rentmeester, the founder of Vision World Foundation, said 40 episodes of *Cooking Without Looking* have aired worldwide on cable and public broadcasting stations since 2005. Through the foundation, the program is offered free to schools and agencies that serve the blind.

"Everyone on the show, the hosts and the guests cooks, all have low vision or no vision. And the further beauty of the show is that everyone who tunes in learns from it," Rentmeester said.

The Vision World Foundation is not an IRS-recognized charity and doesn't solicit donations from individuals; instead it sells advertising to pay for the show. Rentmeester said money from advertising also helps the foundation pay for services for the blind and sight-impaired such as free cooking lessons, transportation to and from doctor visits and helping pay household bills.

Carolyn Lapp, the show's co-host and the executive director of the Florida Outreach Center for the Blind in Palm Springs, is all for taking the "dis" out of disability.

"So many folks think blind people can't cook, clean, have a family or own a home of their own. This show proves they can do anything they would do if they were fully sighted," Lapp said.

Episodes include educational segments with medical professionals. Topics include various causes for blindness and new trends in medical care.

The newest episodes are will be telecast on The Cooking Channel (formerly the Fine Living Network) in November.

Lapp, who lost her vision in a car accident at age 14, said she learned how to use an oven and stove settings by memorizing how the knobs would feel if they were set like a clock. Lapp, married to Bill Lapp who is also legally blind, raised four children, started seven chapters of the National Federation of the Blind and then opened the Palm Beach County center in 2003.

Co-host Annette Watkins, of Sunrise, joined the show in 2006 shortly after being diagnosed with macular degeneration, a disease of the retina that progressively leads to blindness.

For Alondra, Peterson, Daniela and Juan Pablo cooking for a television show at ZooMiami was empowering.

Juan Pablo used the Internet gaming term "pwned" to further express the team's enthusiasm for their newfound ability. "Pwned" in the video game world means to dominate.

"Yeah," said Alondra. "It doesn't matter if we can see or not, we can cook."