

Lights, Camera, Cook!

Tweens Combine Reading, Cooking in Recipe for Success

MARY FELLOWS

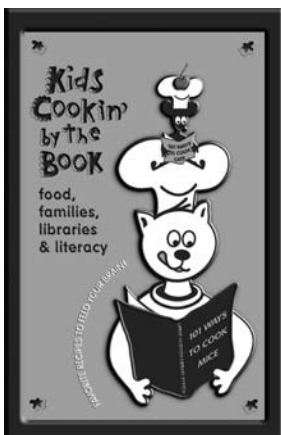


Classy cooks!

“In five, four, three . . .”

The director signals the last two numbers and points at the star as the cameras roll. Chef Gail Sokol, smiling in her maroon chef's coat, welcomes viewers into the kitchen and the company of her three young friends, each sporting a white apron and a chef's toque. Sound like a cooking show on Food Network? It's a cooking show—and a library program.

Feed Your Brain with Chef Gail Sokol is a series of seven half-hour televised cooking shows pairing food from books with young chefs. Upper Hudson Library System (UHLS), which provides services to the twenty-nine public libraries in Albany and Rensselaer Counties in New York, created the show with our partners as part of a grant, Kids Cookin' by the Book. Here's our recipe for success.



Checking Our Cupboards

We had all the ingredients for a math, science, technology, and literacy experience targeting fourth and fifth graders when New York State announced the latest Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant. Census figures identified a growing number of adolescents in our communities, yet program statistics showed that the target age group was receiving short shrift.

Tweens are no longer young enough to come to storytimes, and usually not yet eligible for teen programs. They are busy with outside activities, developing strong friendships, and aware of what's considered cool and not cool by their peers. The library is low priority in their busy lives.

As one librarian noted,

We know from our program stats that there is a direct correlation between program attendance and the age level, i.e., the higher the grade the lower the attendance. Families who were frequent users . . . tell me that they are just too busy to come in and they miss it. [Tweens] do come in for recreational reading material, but even then, it is just as apt to be Mom or Dad who comes in to pick it up . . . We actually deal much more with young adults than the upper elementary child.

Our libraries had identified a need for better service to tweens. As school partners were a strong part of the grant, we also looked at statistics and found a significant percentage of students in all nine partner schools needed improvement in the areas of English language arts, math, and science. In New York,



Mary Fellows cooks up ideas as Manager of Youth and Family Services at Upper Hudson Library System in Albany, New York.

a state infamous for “teaching to the test,” we predicted that any ancillary activity reinforcing classroom instruction with activity-based learning would benefit the student.

Last, we had strong resources close at hand. A community college with a strong hospitality program is nearby. A world-class cooking school is a few hours away. Food editors for major magazines live in the area. We have some great restaurants in our small capital city to satisfy the more sophisticated tastes of legislators from downstate. Best of all, we had a partner from previous projects willing to talk with us about the possibility of doing what, when conceived, seemed like a wild impossibility—a multi-segment kids cooking show.

Assembling the Ingredients

We had a number of goals for the Kids Cookin’ by the Book grant project, including:

- making a connection for students between food and basic science and math concepts;
- providing public libraries the means to attract middle grade patrons through yearlong programs;
- providing middle grade students additional incentives to visit their public library through knowledge of resources, increased comfort level in the building, and relationship with library staff; and
- helping students develop a lifelong habit of using the library.

A cooking show supported these goals by providing a rare and appealing opportunity for tweens. We anticipated that the show would involve tweens in getting to know their public librarian, reading books, visiting their library and other libraries, and learning some of the math and science of cooking.

The grant readers apparently also saw it that way, and the two-year grant was funded at \$83,352.

Mise en Place

Now the real work began. To use a culinary term often repeated during the cooking show, our next efforts were toward *mise en place*, the putting in place of all the ingredients and tools.

During the first year of the grant, libraries and their school partners got organized, purchased materials, and held eight programs together. Libraries and schools could use their programming money by choosing from a menu of presenters who had been pre-screened and whose fee had been negotiated, use local or regional expertise, or create their own program.

In the meantime, negotiations about the scope, timing, talent, and logistics of the cooking show were taking place. I had

identified an engaging local chef with television experience who also taught a popular summer kids baking series. She was very interested in being part of our project. In lieu of a portion of her fee, we agreed to include her name in the title of the show.

The next hurdle was the timing of the filming. School break and test schedules, librarian vacations, and the film crew schedule meant that the fall filming we had planned for was moved up to May. Time to scramble!

Our goal was to have the kids read books and then, in the cooking show, make recipes either from the book or relating to the story. Seven segments of the cooking show were planned, so we needed seven books. From earlier experience with a video storytime, I knew that permission was necessary to use the books on the shows. I contacted publishers, and most were fine with our use of the book itself, but we needed permission to show the cover, and the publishers usually didn’t hold the rights to the cover illustrations.

In the end, we received blanket permission from Roaring Brook Press for their titles, and for other titles, we displayed a generically covered book. It wasn’t the visual we were hoping for, but it worked.

Once we chose the books, Chef Gail developed accompanying recipes. The pairings:

- *Ruby Holler* by Sharon Creech: Get-Over-Homework Chocolate Cookies
- *Holes* by Louis Sachar: Giant Fried Onion Flowers
- *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* by Sharon Creech: Minestrone Soup
- *The Conch Bearer* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: Puris (deep-fried Indian bread)
- *Project Mulberry* by Linda Sue Park: Korean Lettuce Wraps with Beef and Tofu
- *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis: Turkish Delight
- *A Pizza the Size of the Sun* by Jack Prelutsky: Cheesy Vegetable Pizza

Once the recipes were chosen, Chef Gail made a long list of kitchen equipment needed, and we went shopping. Nearly \$800 later, we were well-equipped. We also needed a beautiful, functional kitchen that would accommodate lots of camera equipment. By word-of-mouth, I learned that one of our member library friends Carolyn Fagan, had such a kitchen. She and her family generously agreed to be a part of the project and loan us their kitchen.

Meanwhile, the libraries were working with their partner classes



Chef Gail Sokol at work in the kitchen.

to get the tweens ready. Students were reading the books and talking about them. Teachers and librarians were asked to choose two or three students who weren't likely to be intimidated by a camera and who had a little sparkle to be on the cooking show.

More shopping, this time for food, was in order the evening before filming began. Like Santa Claus, we had a long list, and we checked it at least twice before being satisfied that we had everything.

The students were chosen, the equipment and groceries purchased; we were ready to go!

Let's Get Cooking!

The show was conceived in five parts—an introduction, a shopping segment, a cooking segment, a library segment focusing on the books, and a final tasting/conclusion. We learned that logistics and cost dictate the order of segments filmed, rather than the order in which they will appear in the finished show.

The film crew preferred to film the cooking segment first, so bright and early on the morning of May 8, we arrived at the filming site. The neighbors left their houses to gawk as two big Time Warner trucks pulled up and crew ran cables as thick as an arm into Fagan's house. In the kitchen, Chef Gail and her assistant set up the workspace and began to make the finished products that would be displayed in the final minutes of each segment's filming.

Soon the first of the students arrived, and for the next two days dozens of kids, parents, teachers, and a principal transformed a home into a studio. Excited kids sat in the makeup chair, giggling as pancake makeup was daubed on boys and girls alike. Teachers tied aprons and adjusted hats, while hovering parents snapped pictures and coveted the kitchen. Each young chef donned a neon green *Kids Cookin' by the Book* T-shirt covered by a white apron. Toques with their names on the front completed the look and made them look the part.

In each segment, the young chefs talked and answered questions, measured and stirred, sprinkled and shaped, and last of all, tasted. The tasting provided the most humor, as some of the kids did *not* like their creations. Most notably met with repugnance was the Turkish Delight. A sweet enjoyed in Britain but unfamiliar in the United States, Turkish Delight is a gelatinous, piggybank-pink candy studded with green pistachios. We wanted the kids to be enthusiastic about their creation for the cameras, but this was a hard sell!

Following the wrap-up of the cooking portion, we filmed the library segment in June. We would have liked to film each library segment at the library featured, but the travel and setup costs were too great. So we chose two of our larger libraries, and filmed one day in each, with the groups all coming to the library.

This segment of the show included two booktalks by students—one on the featured book and one on another food-related book. It also included conversation between Chef Gail and the tweens that became the opening and closing of the program, as well as tasting of the recipe prepared by the whole group.

The last segment, the grocery shopping spree, was filmed in August. We spent two days at the nearby Price Chopper grocery store filming seven groups of kids dancing down the grocery store aisles, juggling garlic, reading labels, and discussing the various kinds of onions. As with the other segments, while the logistics made it challenging for the adults, the kids had a blast.

Waiting for the Results

While we were waiting for our cable TV partners to edit the show, we moved from the filming business into the publishing business. With the recipes from the cooking show as the basis, we invited each library in UHLS to host a kids cooking program and then submit the recipes to us for a cookbook. Sixteen libraries participated. In addition to its recipes, each library submitted trivia about itself and a color photo that we included. We sent off the cookbooks to Morris Press, which specializes in printing cookbooks.

The Taste Test

In March, the shows were finished and ready to be aired. They were awesome! The camera work and editing were top notch,

and the finished product showcased our tweens and our project wonderfully. We had one hundred DVD copies of the shows made so that each participant, teacher, school, library, and librarian could have one. Many families wanted extra copies for grandparents and other family members!

Most libraries had a celebratory party—with food, of course!—and some even had a red carpet walk to laud the film stars in their midst. The cookbooks had also arrived and looked terrific. Libraries proudly publicized their accomplishments, and the young chefs got lots of local exposure.

Sweet Success

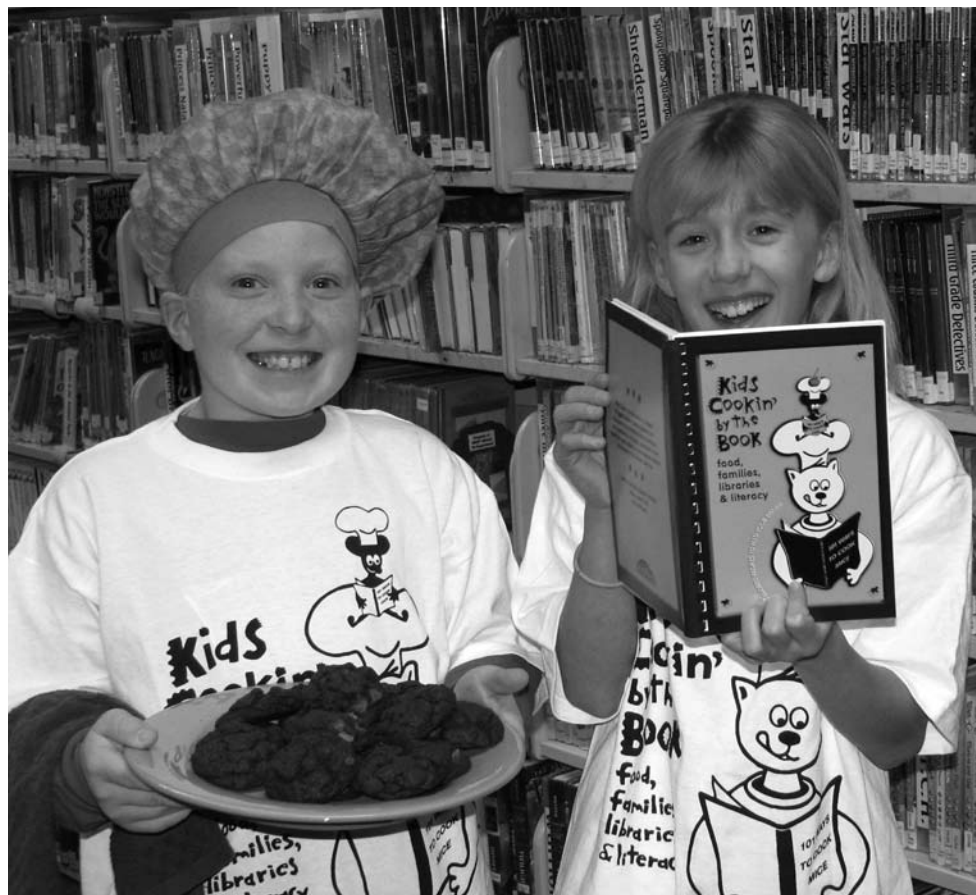
As with any cooking project, proof is in the pudding, or, perhaps in this case, the Turkish Delight! Everyone benefitted from this project.

The tweens involved read some great books, visited their public library and others, met and formed a relationship with the librarian, learned to booktalk, and had the fun of seeing how a TV show is filmed. Their teachers and parents got to be involved in a fun and worthwhile project that engaged and expanded their students.

The libraries developed partners within their communities that enhanced their reputation and reach. Since the conclusion of the grant, some libraries have built even closer relationships with their partners through new projects. One library used the project as a springboard to an intergenerational program by having the kids involved in the project cook an entire dinner for the residents of a senior housing complex. The participating libraries are doing more tween programming than previously, and have cultivated new users through the cooking programs.

The library system formed partnerships that offered benefit to our members beyond the scope of the grant.

An unexpected bonus of leftover money allowed us to negotiate with Time Warner Cable to film five- to seven-minute promotional videos for each of our participating libraries. These air regularly and libraries have used them to boost funding campaigns, informing elected officials, at schools, and as part of orientation for board members.



Food, books . . . who could ask for anything more!



Tasty treats! Korean lettuce wraps with beef and tofu

Kids Cookin' by the Book, and especially the cooking show, was a project that took our libraries in new and exciting directions. It gave tweens a meaningful and fun library experience—and at least a start on their fifteen minutes of fame! ☺

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