Meet Natalie Apodaca
FOOD PROGRAM MONITOR, PLAZA COMMUNITY SERVICES

“In the short time she's been with us, she has completely changed the manner in which meals are provided to children at our three centers. The children now regularly receive fresh, scratch made food. Many of the meals are based on Natalie’s own recipes.”

~ Rosalba Bravo, one of three colleagues to Natalie Apodaca to be a CACFP Leader.

Natalie is the Food Program Coordinator at Plaza Community Services. After reading through her nominations, the CACFP Roundtable was convinced she should be in the first cohort of CACFP Emerging Leaders. We sat down with Natalie over Zoom to learn more about her.
“I advocate by helping change the way children and parents think about food and meal time. I help the children get strong and grow.”

When Natalie would watch Jamie Oliver fix school meals, she thought, “I wish someone would have done that for me” because she, as she vulnerably shared, she experienced food insecurity as a child. Then she thought, “why not me?” Natalie is now Plaza’s very own Jamie Oliver. Educating staff, parents and children about healthy meals and providing them too. Children should have meals made from scratch with seasonal foods, Natalie believes, and she is making sure that the children in her three CACFP child care centers get them.

“I advocate by helping change the way children and parents think about food and meal time. I help the children get strong and grow,” says a very passionate Natalie. She believes that all children deserve access to diverse quality food.

Her journey into CACFP began when she worked at a Head Start center at the ripe age of 18. Originally, she wanted to be an educator but her passion shifted when she met a child at the Head Start center who had not been exposed to a variety of foods. This experience got her thinking about how important it is for children to experience different foods and cultures. The kitchen is where she needed to be. So, Natalie decided to become a chef and went to International Culinary School. She followed that with a Master’s Degree in public policy. She is now doing what she set out to accomplish she is doing now for children in CACFP and her colleagues want to make sure the CACFP Community knows about her
Creatively Efficacious

“SHE HAS A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND STRIVES TO EDUCATE OUR STAFF, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN. SHE GENUINELY GETS EXCITED TALKING ABOUT NEW MENU IDEAS, RECIPES AND WAYS SHE CAN BETTER OUR PROGRAM.”
~MICHAEL GONZALEZ, PLAZA COMMUNITY SERVICES

When asked what would be one thing about herself that she would want people to know, Natalie replied with a smile, “I’m extremely creative.” She can bake and decorate beautiful cakes and, a veritable jill-of-all-trades, she can “do everything!” Based on her accomplishments and the projects she wants to launch, there is no doubt.

When the pandemic turned the world upside down, Natalie started a food pantry at Plaza Community Services because she knew that her families, as well as the greater East Los Angeles community, would be in need of food. She was able to partner with Food Forward to ensure families still had access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The food pantry remains open and continues to grow as the community recovers from the pandemic.

In addition, Natalie has a number of projects that she wants to get up and running to complement the Food Program she oversees, such as partnering with California State University Los Angeles students to teach her cooks and assistant cooks, while in turn, exposing the students to CACFP and cooking for children in child care.

Another goal is to create a wellness center to support parents and children to lead healthy lifestyles.
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I barely got the question out when I asked Natalie the most important quality a leader in the CACFP should have when she quickly replied “compassion.” Compassion in all parts of the program, she says, is a requirement in a leader. Compassion for her staff, for the parents and for the children they serve. “This program is hard. All around a difficult one but a rewarding one,” says Natalie.

Natalie thought for a moment when I asked her, if you could change something about CACFP, what would that be? When she answered, it wasn’t what I expected, she didn’t say anything about paperwork or higher reimbursement rates. She said “We don’t really get valued, especially the cooks. The cooks are the heart of the whole thing. I want the cooks to be recognized and have more resources.”

Her cooks were top of mind again when Natalie thought about what she would do if she had a magic wand to make issues facing our field go away. She would wave the magic wand and make the pandemic go away. As things return to normal for many, Natalie’s staff is still terrified to come to work. They’re located in an area where cases were extremely high, things were really bad, she says, and they’re still scared. And the kids, “I want to have all of our kids be together,” she says as she describes children sitting at tables by themselves. They aren’t able to engage in learning about food and nutrition together. “So, yeah,” she says, “I would make all of this pandemic and all of the hardships that have come with it, go away.”

Natalie embodies her own advice and leads with the utmost compassion. Congratulations, Natalie, and thank you for being a CACFP Leader.