

Catering to Youngsters

Minority company serves up healthy eating



James Baker, left, and his helper fix lunches for the youngsters at the Family Care Center. (Photo by Dottie Bean)

A few months ago Karen Underwood was looking for a catering company to provide breakfast, lunch and snacks to children enrolled in the city's Family Care Center program.

James Baker, owner of Mtani Catering, had recently been through the city's new certification program for minority and women-owned businesses and wanted to obtain a city contract.

Baker submitted a bid to provide the Family Care Center's meals and was the successful low bidder on the project.

"We didn't know what to expect," said Underwood, who is the child care center manager for the Family Care Center, "but he has been wonderful. He has incorporated fresh fruit and vegetables into all the meals."

Baker provides breakfast, lunch and snacks for 65–70 children a day and recently began making meals for infants, which requires a separate menu.

"James has been very flexible in working with which foods he can provide to which age group," Underwood added.

For example, the pre-school children can get raw apples and carrots but infants and toddlers could choke on the pieces of raw food, so Baker substitutes apple sauce for them. "And I don't use grapes for them at all," Baker said.

Underwood and Family Care Center Director Joanna Rodes particularly like the fact that Baker includes plenty of fresh food in his menus and takes care to make sure he follows recommended portions in the USDA guidelines.

"The nice thing about working with James," Rodes said, "is that the children are getting fresh food – real proteins, homemade soups, fresh fruits and vegetables. The soups are all made from scratch."

Before hiring Baker, the Family Care Center had a dietician and helpers on staff to provide the meals and most recently, the Fayette County Schools brought in meals for the children.

"When we bid this out we were hoping for a company we were comfortable with and we could have dialogue with about which foods were working," Rodes said.

Mtani Catering is a small company, made up of Baker, his wife and a third worker. The Family Care Center contract is the company's largest contract. They cater other events as well, including some government events.

Baker said his goal is to provide healthy choices in a kid-friendly way so the children will go home and ask their parents for food similar to that they have at the Family Care Center. Some of his creations have included waffles with watermelon instead of syrup; turkey wraps in whole wheat tortillas; whole wheat pizza with low-fat mozzarella cheese, homemade tomato sauce and grilled chicken; oatmeal with blueberries for topping; and lots of steamed broccoli.

Baker gives some credit for his success to the LFUCG's Minority Business Enterprise Program and its classes for minority and women-owned businesses.

"I was notified about the Family Care Center project bid because I was certified through the program to do business with the city," Baker said. "If I weren't certified I wouldn't have found out about it."

"I come in contact with a number of businesses through classes and events we host. When I met James and Andrea Baker, I knew they were special. They stood out from the rest. They were determined from the very beginning," said Marilyn Clark, the city's minority business enterprise liaison. "The first thing they did was to set up a personal appointment with me to discuss their business. They registered in our data base. They attended certification classes and classes on how to do business with LFUCG. They followed through on the certification process without delay.

"They have catered several events for me and received great reviews on the quality of their food and the variety of selections. I couldn't be more proud of how they've been able to build their business in a short period of time," Clark said.

"My advice to other minority and women-owned businesses is to make sure you go through all the processes and certify your business. It's well worth it in the end," Baker said.

Rodes said Baker has certainly been successful with his contract with the Family Care Center. "I think the child care staff has very high standards and when I hear them sing his praises and I see the children clean their plates, it speaks volumes about the job James does as a caterer."