

2014 Breakthrough Employer John Talmage

There is a social theory that the closer a person lives to commodities such as restaurants and other businesses, the less likely that person is to benefit from them. This theory has held true in areas such as Pine Manor, where residents experience chronic unemployment despite being just a stone's throw from a multitude of shopping and dining destinations.



That's where John Talmage and the Pine Manor Improvement Association come in. As a Pine Manor volunteer and former member of the community's board of directors, John realized the need to create employment opportunities for its residents.

"Too often Pine Manor gets associated as 'Crime Manor,'" says John, owner of Sanibel's Sweet Melissa's Café and Island Pizza Company. "That's an unfortunate tagline because it's not that at all."

With his background in restaurants, John set out to help create the Goodwill/Pine Manor Culinary Training and Certification Program.

"John has been essential in helping get the culinary school off the ground," says Goodwill's Pine Manor outreach coordinator, Shari Clark. "He was also on our garden committee when it was in the planning stages."

The culinary program, which is for anyone in the Southwest Florida area, puts participants through a 12-week, 280 hour course, designed to prepare workers for employment in the quickly-growing food service industry. The program is offered in partnership with iCare. At the end of the program, taught by Chef James Fraser, participants get the opportunity to intern at Talmage's restaurants.

At Sweet Melissa's Café, interns get the experience of fine dining with Chef Melissa, John's wife. At Island Pizza Company, interns learn to work quickly and efficiently in a fast-paced, casual dining environment.

"Anyone who completes internships will be offered a position," says John. So far he has hired 25 people from the Pine Manor community, and with the culinary program now up and running, John says his focus will be on hiring program graduates.

"If we didn't have the partners like Goodwill and others, we wouldn't have been able to do this," says John.

Many think the folks John has helped would say the same about him.