



Houston's Belong Kitchen: A recipe for inclusion

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Belong Kitchen employees include Viviana, Ellie, Andrea and Katie, front row from left; and John, Cheyenne and Rebecca, back row from left).



Belong Kitchen employees Kendall and Pepe. Photos by Marlo Wise

Twenty-three-year-old Ellie Brown washes dishes four days a week at Belong Kitchen in Houston, Texas. Ellie loves baseball, and the day Houston Astros relief pitcher Ryan Pressly walked into the kitchen is memorable. Taking a photograph with Pressly meant a lot. "He came (at the end of) my shift," Ellie explains. "It felt good."

Ellie's mother, Kim Brown, founded Belong Kitchen in 2019 when she realized there weren't many opportunities for her daughter after finishing high school. Ellie was born with intellectual and developmental delays.

Kim traveled the state, talking with people who hired employees with IDD and searching for the right kind of business to create for her daughter. A cooking class Ellie attended in high school gave Kim the idea for Belong Kitchen: Mass produce grab-and-go family meals for community members to buy with a mission to provide "dignified, meaningful, paid employment for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in a nurturing environment. These individuals struggle to find jobs, purpose and social connections."

The response was strong, and Kim raised enough money through individual donors, grants and a cooking competition to rent retail space and purchase kitchen equipment. Houston restaurateurs, family and friends jumped in to help launch Belong Kitchen.

"I wanted to change the narrative, from the public's perspective," says Kim, Belong Kitchen's executive director. "When someone walks into an establishment and they see my daughter working, that should be the norm, not the exception. I think if we change the perception, it will go a long way to give them more opportunities."

Belong Kitchen depends on 30 paid employees who are disabled and a pool of 75 community volunteers to produce family meals such as chicken pot pie and king ranch chicken casserole, a popular Mexican comfort dish. Each meal feeds four to six people and is available for pick up Monday through Friday. Employees work in three-hour shifts and receive wage increases as they gain experience.

"We think there should be one of these in every city," Kim says. "As a parent, you want your child to be accepted and feel like they are contributing and that they belong. Our community has embraced our employees, our concept and our food."

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On the cover: Belong Kitchen depends on paid employees who are disabled and 75 community volunteers to produce family meals. Photos by Marlo Wise. Article by Vanessa Infanzon. Published eight times per year, *Unity* is exclusively distributed to clients of Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group, both world leaders in foodservice. To contact us, send an email to marketing@thompsonhospitalityjv.com. ©2024 Thompson Hospitality and Compass Group. Produced by Content Spectrum.

