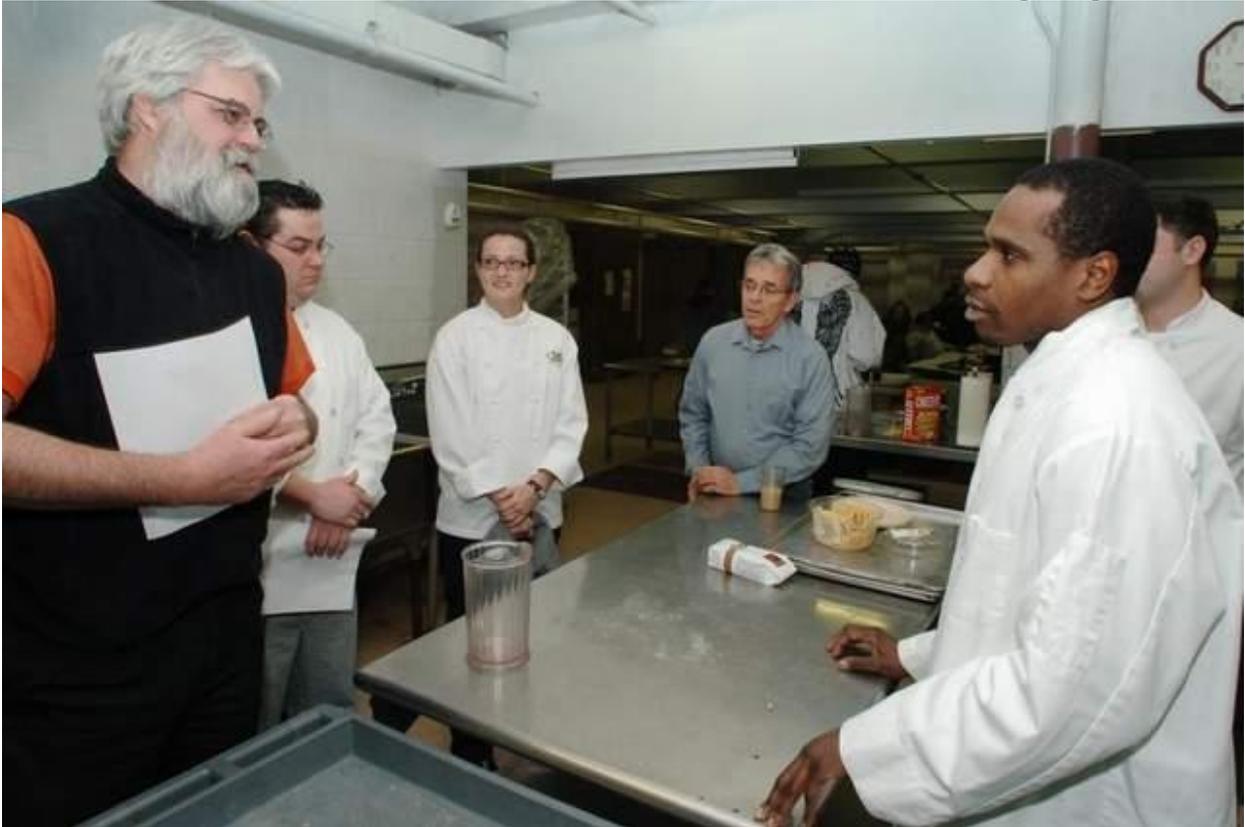


Dutchess Outreach leader is an advocate and a visionary

Civil rights movement inspired man's work feeding hungry

Written by: Lauren Yanks

For The Poughkeepsie Journal



Dutchess County Outreach executive director Brian Riddell, left, talk with Culinary Institute of America students during their visit to the Lunch Box in the City of Poughkeepsie on Thursday, Jan. 8. The Lunch Box manager, center, Ralph Rogers was also on hand. Students from left; Gregory Martin, Hope Hertzler, Albert Foley and Gerard Phanor. / Lee Ferris

Although he stands at almost 6-foot-6, Brian Riddell's easy smile and modest demeanor reveal a natural gentleness. Born in Brooklyn in 1953, Riddell was the middle child of five siblings and enjoyed a childhood filled with stickball and other games.

"We lived on Brooklyn Avenue and had two-way traffic, but we still had lots of fun playing in the street," he laughed.

A good student in school, Riddell remembers being inspired by the civil rights movement.

“I saw the civil rights movement on television — and all the social movements of the time — and it left an indelible impression on me,” he said.

In fact, Riddell participated in a strike at his high school after the infamous Kent State incident where students were killed during a war protest.

“It was the first student strike at a Catholic high school,” he said. “We were outraged that protest was met with such force. It was clear that there was something wrong in our society, and I wanted to try and change that.”

Riddell went on to graduate from Brooklyn College in 1977, after taking a couple of years off to travel around the country.

“I came back with a real desire to make the world a better place, and I was also really interested in nutrition and healthy food,” he said.

In 1978, Riddell married Michele Driscoll, a Brooklyn native and special education teacher he met during his travels, and they lived in a cabin in Virginia for a number of years. While there, Riddell got a job in a community action agency.

those in need,” he said. “It was a lot of driving around and meeting many extraordinary people who lived through the civil rights movement in the South. I learned grant writing and budgeting and the politics of nonprofit organizations in a time when everything was cut to the bone.”

Riddell enjoyed the work and felt good about trying to help others.

“I see things as really out of balance, and people really suffer from that,” he said. “My sensitivities have led me to do this work. I’m not someone who can stand by and not try to do something to help others. As a society, we’re all responsible for each other.”

In 1985, Riddell moved back to New York and bought an abandoned creamery on Huguenot Street, the historic landmark district in New Paltz with buildings dating back to the 1700s.

“My vision was to repair the creamery so my family and I could live in it,” he said. “I restored it and added some modern things here and there, like big windows facing west. It’s been our home ever since.”



“I was an outreach person in rural Virginia working to bring potable water to houses and to help empower Brian Riddell, executive director for Dutchess Outreach, speaks during the second annual Dutchess Outreach brunch Sept. 21, 2008, at Dutchess Golf and Country Club in the Town of Poughkeepsie. / Karl Rabe

In 1989, Riddell began working for Dutchess Outreach in Poughkeepsie. Started in 1974, Dutchess Outreach helps people with little or no income obtain basic needs. Riddell became executive director in 1995.

“Our mission is to provide people’s basic needs when they cannot provide their own, and help them to become self-sufficient,” he said. “We also advocate for individuals and issues to raise awareness about the problems of poverty and the public response. Our office is located in Poughkeepsie and is open to anyone in Dutchess County.”

Dutchess Outreach offers a number of programs, including an emergency food program, which provides groceries to people in need.

“People tell us they need food, and we ask them questions some of our funders require, and then we set them up for a few days,” he said.

In season, Dutchess Outreach partners with Poughkeepsie Farm Project and gets bulk donations, garnering a lot of fresh vegetables. This helps them with their well-known Lunch Box program.

“The Lunch Box is a free, mid-day meal we provide six days a week that now feeds, on average, 275 people a day,” he said. “That’s up from about 220 a couple years ago.”

Indeed, Riddell has seen firsthand the pains of the poor economy and has recently begun an evening meal program run totally by volunteers.

“We’re at a point where we’re geared to give a meal four nights a week,” he said. “The response from volunteers has been amazing. Volunteers are really at the heart of all that we do. And we’re always looking to widen our circle of volunteers if anyone is interested.”

The organization also prepares and delivers meals — about 20 a day — to people who are homebound with HIV/AIDS.

“Funding recently ran out in 2011 for the homebound program, but we’re keeping the project going the best we can,” Riddell said. “We also feed kids in an after-school program. In Poughkeepsie, more than 50 percent of the kids in school are on a free or reduced lunch program. I have always believed in the importance of nutrition, and its impact on the social and educational development of children.”

Dutchess Outreach also helps people facing eviction and advocates for the homeless to get into shelters. It helps with utilities and medication as well.

“People are having a hard time paying their heating bills the last few years,” Riddell said. “We also help with medication. For instance, we see people who are diabetic and can’t afford the insulin or the needles.”

Riddell emphasizes his collaboration with other charitable organizations and the importance of individual involvement.

“It’s really a communal effort,” he said. “Over the past few years, the funding is under attack on every level, and things have gotten a lot harder. It’s the individual support that’s carrying us — we’re really depending on that to make up the difference.”

Poughkeepsie resident Kathleen O’Rourke-Murphy is the associate director of Dutchess Outreach and has worked with Brian for 21 years.

“During the time I’ve worked with him, Brian has taken the agency from a small, grassroots organization that operated out of a basement of a church to a large, countywide agency,” she said. “He’s an advocate at heart and has made extraordinary gains in our organization.”

O’Rourke-Murphy calls Riddell a visionary and an excellent steward of the organization’s financial resources.

“He’s capable of constantly seeing the big picture while simultaneously always carrying the needs of the poor in his heart,” she said. “He’s the most humble man I know, and yet the man who has the most to be proud of. He’s a big man and has the heart and intellect to match his size.”

Tara Whalen has worked at Dutchess Outreach for 16 years.

“It’s wonderful working with Brian,” she said. “He’s compassionate, very understanding and helpful.”

Whalen emphasizes Riddell’s ability to see the agency through a lot of challenges through his hard work.

“Brian is on a lot of outside committees and does a lot to get the word out there,” she said. “He works at least 70 hours a week, probably more.”

Overall, Riddell feels that being a part of the boomer generation has shaped the work he’s chosen to do, as well as how he chooses to do it.

“While growing up, I saw the problems of inequity and saw the radical attempts to overthrow the system,” he said. “I learned that radical methods were unsuccessful, so we do the reform work on a day-to-day basis. It’s slow, but things do change. Just being able to help one person gets me through the day.”