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City Fresh has taste for success

The smells of Latin, Caribbean and Southern soul food aren't unusual in Dorchester's Four Corners area.

But the home-cooking aromas wafting there from City Fresh Foods are feeding a success story that has won the 9-year-old commissary admirers inside and outside of its diverse, lower-income neighborhood.

BIZLINES

Cromwell Schubarth

"We're all about employing locally, living locally and making food that the people in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan know and love," says Glynn Lloyd, City Fresh's 35-year-old founder.

Glynn, his 38-year-old brother, Sheldon, and their 50 workers deliver everything from ribs to curries, from collard greens to rice and beans, as well as more traditional fare to schools and shut-ins throughout the Boston area.

It's a recipe that has helped the Lloyd brothers grow City Fresh into a \$2 million-a-year business.

"I'd like to say this has all gone according to plan," says Glynn, who came up with the idea after teaching high school dropouts.

His original scheme involved making health-food meals from ingredients supplied locally. But prices, availability and customer tastes soon changed that plan.

"We realized pretty quickly that the most important thing we can do here is provide solid jobs and benefits by giving people the food they wanted," he says. "The driving force behind how we run this business has been survival."

Within a week of refurbishing

an early City Fresh kitchen, faulty steam heat nearly shut it down.

"The ceiling collapsed. It was a disaster," Glynn says. "But we were able to work things out. With the help of our workers and the community, we pulled through."

City Fresh was recently recognized for the second consecutive year as one of the country's top 100 urban small enterprises by the Boston-based Initiative for a Competitive Inner City.

"City Fresh and the others we honored make invaluable contributions to the inner city by giving local people good jobs with benefits," says Anne Habiby, co-executive director of ICIC.

City Fresh's hourly workers average about \$10 an hour, and managers, most of whom worked their way up from the ground level, average about \$38,000 a year.

Full-time workers are offered contribution-matched retirement plans and the company picks up half of their health insurance costs. All workers get accrued vacation.

"The companies on this year's list are all lean and nimble, yet have good retention rates among their workers," Habiby says. "They instill loyalty by paying well and encouraging people to move up through the ranks."

Such praise doesn't alter the Lloyds' focus, though.

"Around here, we're a big story and that's what matters to us," Glynn says. "In the bigger picture, we're just one small part of making things better."