

# Zayante Man Cooked Up Storm For Valley Mudslide Victims

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Sentinel Staff Writer

Of the many volunteers who helped out after the Jan. 4 storm, 18-year-old Perry Ralston of Zayante probably is the only one who spent most of his time in the kitchen.

Ralston spent the past week cooking up a storm as the chief chef at the disaster center set up by the Red Cross at St. John's Catholic Church in Felton.

While many mothers complain about having to cook for a family of four, Ralston finds it invigorating to cook three meals a day for as many as 500 disaster victims and rescue workers.

But Ralston doesn't want his food to taste like he's cooking for hundreds. "Actually, I think people have been eating better here than they ate at home. Eating here is like going out to a restaurant," he said.

The fare at St. John's came pretty close to restaurant food last Monday night when Costella's Chalet in Felton sent over prime rib for the hungry disaster victims and rescue workers.

Wednesday night's menu consisted of roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy. Ralston also was cooking spaghetti for the vegetarians in the crowd.

He took over as chief chef last Sunday after eating at the disaster center one evening and finding the food wasn't as good as he thought it could be.

"I want to fix food so when people come in, they don't say that this food is sickening. I want them to ask for seconds," he said, as he peeked in on two huge pans of mashed potatoes staying warm in the oven.

Between tasting the spaghetti sauce for just the right touch of seasonings and checking the

five roasts he had going in the oven, Ralston reflected a bit on his views about cooking.

First of all, he stressed, a menu ought to offer some variety day after day.

When he first took over the kitchen, Ralston discovered that whoever planned the menu was proposing to have ham one night and pork roast the next.

Feeling that this wasn't offering people enough variety, Ralston put a call out through local newspapers for donations of roast beef.

The result was the five huge roasts he had browning in the oven. All the food fixed at the kitchen was donated from various sources.

And Ralston doesn't believe in wasting food. When too much food showed up in the kitchen from different church groups for Thursday night's dinner, Ralston sent some of the excess to disaster victims still stranded in their homes.

Ralston is one of those people with seemingly unending energy. Once he got started cooking, he worked Monday and Tuesday straight without any esleep.

On Tuesday, he estimated he fed 1,500 people.

Despite his youth, Ralston said that cooking had been his "profession" for seven years.

"I started working in Costella's kitchen as a cook's helper when I was 10 and I worked there until I was 17," he said.

Ralston gave up cooking at Costella's to become an apprentice gunsmith. Currently, he is unemployed and without a car since his vehicle was wrecked while he was helping disaster victims in Lompico.

Asked why he hadn't chose cooking as his life's calling, Ralston simply held out his burned and cut hands and pointed to the acne on his face from working around so much grease.

But you could tell just by watching Ralston fly about St. John's huge kitchen that while

cooking may not become his profession, it is his first love.

He moved from one pot to another, directed Red Cross workers who were bringing in cases of canned fruit, greeted friends who came in to say hello and then politely ushered them out of "his kitchen."

Through all the confusion, Ralston never missed a beat and never once lost his patience.

"So far, I've been really successful with the health department," Ralston said, surveying the kitchen. The health department officials stop in once in awhile, take a look around and then leave him alone, he explained.

Cooking, Ralston said, is in his blood.

"Cooking has been in my family for a number of years, you might say," he commented, exhibiting cooking knives that had been used by his grandfather and great-grandfather.

Taking from his knapsack a cleaver that was used by his great-grandfather, Ralston pointed to a dent in the knife's blade.

"Each dent on this knife has a story. This one that looks like a tooth occurred when my great-grandfather hit a guy who was bothering him while he was trying to cook in his restaurant."

The cleaver is so sharp, Ralston said, "that all you have to do is drop it on a piece of meat."

"Actually, most of my experience came from my mother who used to tell me, 'You cook dinner. I have to go to work,' " Ralston laughed.

His mother also helps out in the disaster center kitchen, along with several other people whom, Ralston said, he couldn't do without.

"I couldn't do a damn thing if it weren't for the crew that I have," he said. "If it weren't for this crew, this (cooking effort) just wouldn't be around."

As he went back to stirring his spaghetti sauce, Ralston said, "Cooking is easy. You just do it. You've got to get in and just do it."



Perry Ralston puts giant meatloaf into oven

Sentinel Photos



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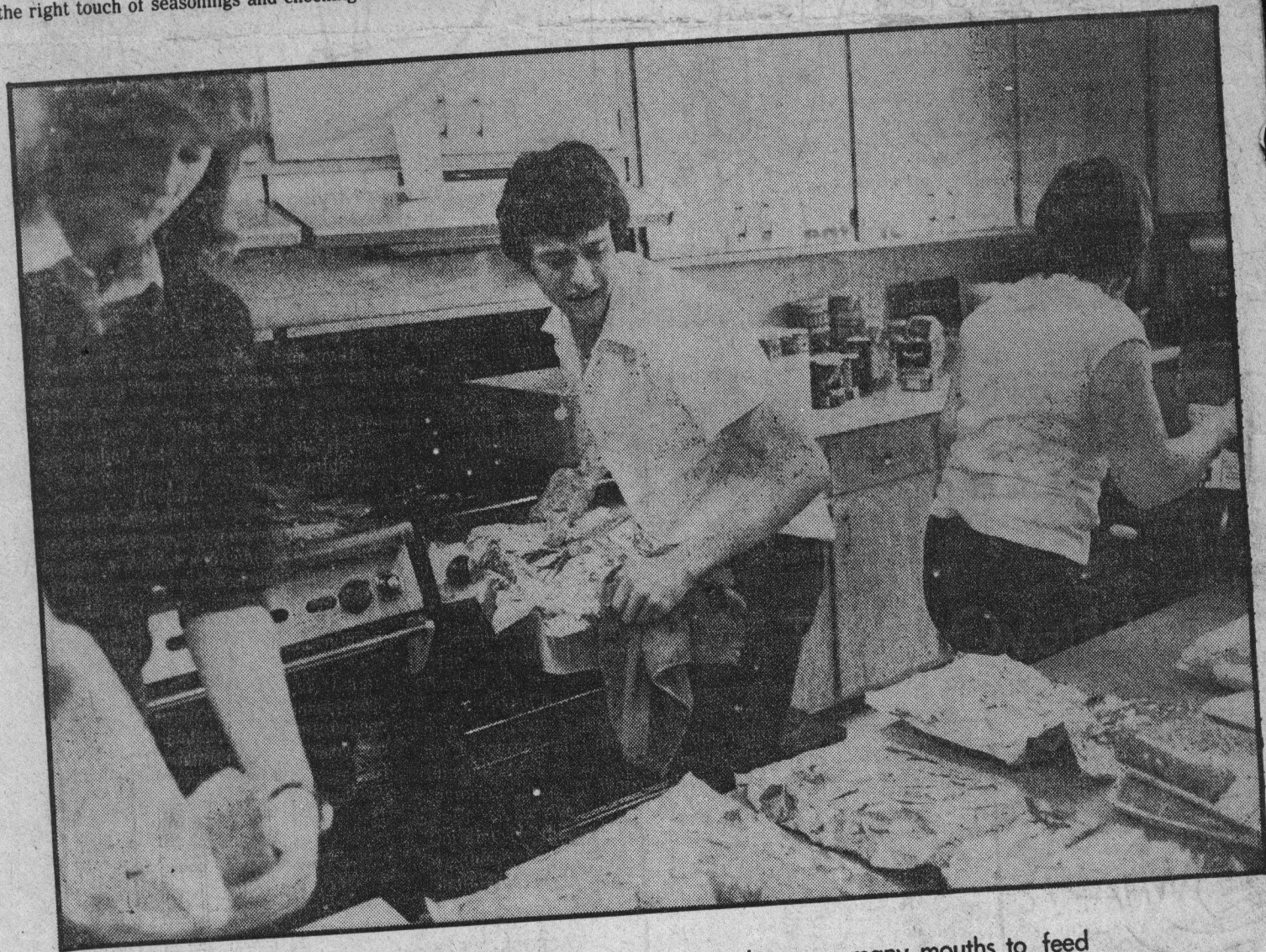
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Sometimes the kitchen gets crowded when there are many mouths to feed