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Accident leads gourmet chef to cook for preschoolers

By: Karen Berkowitz. | kberkowitz@pioneerlocal.com | [@KarenABerkowitz](https://twitter.com/KarenABerkowitz)



Nieto's chef Nabor Vasquez volunteered for kitchen duty at a Highland Park preschool after learning the cook slipped on the ice and broke her wrist. | Karen Berkowitz/Sun Times Media

Pam Carlson is proud that her Highland Park preschool serves meals that have been freshly prepared on site. But when her cook slipped on the ice and broke her wrist in March, Carlson faced a dilemma.

The executive director at Highland Park Community Nursery School and Day Care Center put out an appeal through communications channels, and who should respond but chef Nabor Vasquez of Nieto's, the successor to the famed Carlos' Restaurant in Highland Park.

Vasquez learned about the short-term need for a cook from a friend who has a youngster currently enrolled at the school. Vasquez, a Highwood resident, also has a personal connection to Community Nursery School; his 17-year-old son, Nabor Vasquez Jr., once attended the program and is bound for college as a member of the Schuler Scholar Program at Highland

Park High School.

Vasquez agreed to pitch in for two weeks. He starts his day at 8:30 a.m. at Community Nursery School, then heads over to Nieto's at 3:30 p.m. to prepare for dinner patrons. He was found mid-morning on Monday stirring a simmering pot of tomato sauce for the day's lunch entree of meatballs and pasta.

Carlson said her cook of 20 years, Maria Avila, has been advising Vasquez about how much of this, and how much of that.

"She calls Nabor and lets Nabor know the quantities," said Carlson. "He's not used to cooking in large quantities."

The day care director says Avila will be out for some time.

"She is not going to be able to cook independently for at least another six or eight weeks," said Carlson.

Vasquez has worked for Debbie and Carlos Nieto for the past 18 years and taught cooking classes in their home. He started at their Cafe Central, 455 Central Ave., in downtown Highland Park before moving over to the upscale Carlos', a restaurant known for fine French dining and prices to match. There, Vasquez prepared dishes like foie gras, lobster and roast duck.

The Nieto family closed Carlos' in late 2011 and reopened in early 2012 as Nieto's in the same location at 429 Temple Avenue in Highland Park. Nieto's offers American fare, including braised short ribs and salmon, in a more casual atmosphere.

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