



Co-founder Kofi Moyo and other 'Real Men' discuss 20 years of Real Men Cook Chicago

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Father's Day is a couple of weeks away, and Chicago women are breathing easy knowing that regardless of whether the men in their lives like the tie, socks, [cologne](#) or other random Father's Day gifts they buy, they've got a fair shot of making these fathers happy by attending a [Real Men Cook](#) event.

[Yvette Moyo Gillard](#) and Kofi Moyo are no longer the event planners for the Real Men Cook Chicago event, but for 20 years strong, they were the creators who made it a family staple.



"We wanted to do something that we owned and controlled rather than just working for other people," said co-founder Kofi Moyo (pictured left). "We heard about an event called Men Who Cook that was being done in New York through [Lana Turner] a mutual friend of ours."

"When Yvette and I got married, she didn't know that I cooked," said Moyo, the former husband of [Gillard](#), who is now residing in Atlanta. "After awhile, we kept kicking that idea around and decided that we would do the event patterned after what was taking place in New York. Lana Turner's event wasn't geared to men on Father's Day. That was our notion to celebrate the involvement of men with families."

The first year's event in 1990 featured a lot of recognizable names, including our current [President Barack H. Obama](#), [Bill Campbell](#) from ABC News, [Monroe Anderson](#) from CBS News, former mayor [Eugene Sawyer](#), marketing strategist [Eugene Morris](#) and [Dr. Carl Bell](#) from the [Community Mental Health Council](#).

"I've been to every last one of them," said Dr. Carl Bell, who received Real Men Cook's Golden Skillet Award on June 21, 1992. "It seemed like a good idea having a Father's Day event where men come out and cook. It's a good, healthy, wholesome family event that benefits not-for-profit, community-based organizations in the African-American community."

Dr. Bell, who is in his 60s and has children ranging from 15 to 40, won't be cooking in this year's event due to a business appointment. But he's still making time to drop by the June 20th event under [new management with Capital Marketing Group](#).

"My favorite part is the food," he said with a laugh. Dr. Bell's specialty items include buttermilk cornbread, greens and turkey.

Many of the items being prepared at the Real Men Cook events have stories behind them. Moyo's Captain Kofi's Candlelight Catfish was given that name because while he was trying to prepare the smoked catfish, a thunderstorm shut the electricity off so he ended up preparing the food under the porch with candles.

Walter Cannon, who has been an attendee for 16 years and a 14-year member of the Men's Core Group—a group of approximately nine men who recruit new cooks and volunteers for Real Men Cook—makes shrimp and broccoli casserole and "felony" wings. The latter food has the reputation of being "so hot they make you catch a case."

"As the event unfolds, a lot of men are novice cooks," said Chaga Walton, 61, who has cooked with his son, father-in-law and his uncle. His brother-in-law and brother cooked in the [Real Men Cook Atlanta event](#). His specialty items include a habanero sauce called Stomping Salsa, chips, guacamole and a Moroccan tagine dish.

"Many of the men that come may cook once a month, may cook once a week, may cook only on Father's Day," Walton explained. "And then there are some that cook all the time and professionally as well."

With this event housing anywhere from 150 to 200 cooks who were serving enough samples for 300 people, it was a time for men to be acknowledged.

"Father's Day went in the background," said Mark Fishback, who has been involved for nine years. He's also one of the leaders in the Men's Core Group.

"This event has given us an opportunity to open up Father's Day to celebrate it in different ways," continued Fishback, whose specialty item is black bean corn salad, nicknamed Heritage Salad because of the red, black and yellow colors. "It has opened up many of the stores in Chicago. Other organizations around Chicago have decided to have Father's Day celebrations. All of this came from Real Men Cook."

America's Commander-in-Chief agrees.



"Thanks to Yvette and Kofi Moyo, Father's Day in the black communities throughout this country has not been the same since the first annual Real Men Cook celebration was launched in 1990," President Barack Obama said in the foreword to *Real Men Cook: More than 100 Easy Recipes Celebrating Tradition and Family*. "My wife, Michelle, and I have enjoyed many of these events throughout the 15 years they've been hosted in Chicago."

According to the 2009 Real Men Cook Chicago event survey completed by [CR Market Surveys](#), 59.1 percent of attendees were first-time visitors; 30.6 percent came to spend time with family and friends; 25 percent came to enjoy the food; 42 percent came to the event with family; 35 percent came with friends; 60.9 percent don't have children in the household; 51.6 percent were single; 31.3 percent were married and 10.9 percent were divorced.

Real Men Cook events in Chicago primarily include 47.7 percent south siders, 18.5 percent south suburbanites and 16.9 in the south suburbs. Although the celebration focuses on men, 69.8 percent of the attendees are female and 30.2 percent are male. The largest age ranges for attendees are 40.63 percent from 35 to 49; 23.44 percent ranging from 25 to 34 and 18.75 percent ranging from 50 to 62.

"For a number of years, [Real Men Cook] might've been the only recognition that was given to fathers, especially in the city of Chicago," said Walton, a friend of founder Moyo's, who has been involved for 14 years. "Coming together, the camaraderie and not only the spirit of competitiveness but also support was genuine. Real Men Cook gives to charity and that spoke volumes to me. This is a day that men could actually be sitting back, watching the game and be catered to. They give that up, and they're cooking, prepping and serving...literally stepping up to the plate."

Although the event couldn't be a Real Men Cook event without the food, for most of them, this annual event has a deeper meaning.

"The cooking is really minor," said Cannon, 45, and a father of three. "The biggest thrill is to see the bonding that the men have with one another. Men go through the same struggle in every household, and the event lets men come together, show we're loved, just to breathe and exhale."

While some may wonder why would a father use his entire day of relaxation and recognition to serve other people, Moyo has the answer in the book *Real Men Cook: More than 100 Easy Recipes Celebrating Tradition and Family*.

"After a number of years, I asked that question 'What is it that makes you spend your own money, give up your time, which requires shopping and then cooking for that one day on Sunday?'" the co-founder said and referenced the last chapter of the cookbook. "It takes an awful lot of effort to cook samples for 300 people, which is what we ask for them to do. I put all of those interviews together and wrapped my own story around it."

"Towards the end of the event we get to sit around and talk about what happened during the day, and it's just a very magical time," continued Moyo. "It's something that you'd have to really experience yourself to almost understand the feeling that is there, especially among the men themselves, and what it means to sort of accomplish bringing happiness to people."

Although the saying goes that the way to man's heart is through his stomach, other guests leave content, too.

"Just to see the smiles of children, adults and elders that come by and taste some of the food that we have is immeasurable," said Walton. "And the way that Real Men Cook celebrates it is by giving back. What better way to be a father than to give back?"