



Rising Up for Success

By Tracey Moro / Photography by Mike Ferdinande

And to think it all started with a dream.

Mark Prentiss had a vision to open a restaurant with special needs adults as staff. He and his wife, Deborah, talked about it, dreamt about it, and finally they met someone who could help them with their dream. With a little financial support and some well deserved applause for their idea, the couple began their pursuit for a grant. After breaking it all down, their focus broadened to include much more than a restaurant and Rising Stars Academy was born.



Opening as a school for special needs adults (18-26), with disciplines within the food industry, Rising Stars Academy had 24 students when it started in 2013. Location in Center Line (in an old elementary school) the academy has more than 160 students, five teachers, 15 teacher assistants and 17 transportation vehicles.

“We have a really good staff. They are great people and they understand the mission of helping our students to gain skills to eventually be employed,” said Prentiss, who began his career as a teacher with Warren Consolidated schools. “We want our students to see different perspectives from different people, so we rotate them through all the teachers.”

How does it work?

Adults with special needs wanting to gain additional skills that will assist them in today’s job market can apply to the school. The students rotate between teachers every four weeks, giving them different context on their same four subjects - math/ money, social skills/speaking, reading, and hands-on training. The hands-on education in a work-based learning program gives students skills to function as productive citizens.

What about the restaurant?

Once the couple broadened their view for the school they knew a restaurant was just a portion

of what they really wanted to do. In the classes taught today, the students see all facets of the food industry. From growing plants in their six-acre urban farm behind the school or in the aquaponics room, they teach kids to grow lettuce, herbs and more. Everything grown gets used either in a kitchen or as food for the animals. Yes, there are even chickens to feed. The outdoor garden has fruit trees, a butterfly garden area, honey bees and raised beds so students in wheelchairs can also participate.

Working with the Macomb County Community Health Department, the students work for HOME Hub, the foundation that helps to support the school. The foundation acts as a vendor to local restaurants providing services and products, including food prep services, and baked goods like the breads and rolls. “The students can opt to work additional hours throughout the summer months so we can continue to provide services and food products to our clients,” said Prentiss. “Food gives them immediate feedback because they can see and taste to make it better.”

In the commercial kitchen the students learn food prep like cutting



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vegetables or kneading dough. “We prepare cut vegetables for El Charros and provide cookies, protein bites for Beyond Juice. Just two of our local clients,” said Prentiss. “We also prepare our own meals for lunch in our cafeteria.”

The bakery area produces 10 to 15 thousand buns a week. “We make everything from scratch and we use what we can from our gardens,” said Prentiss. With more than a dozen types of breads, just as many types of buns and baquettes, pretzels and desserts, their bakery can handle just about anything.

But breads and food prep aren't the only thing students can learn and work at. There's also hospital work, a dealership, janitorial work, and other jobs that help students gain workforce readiness skills. “When companies contact us needing something, we try to come up with a solution using the students here to get the job done,” said Prentiss.

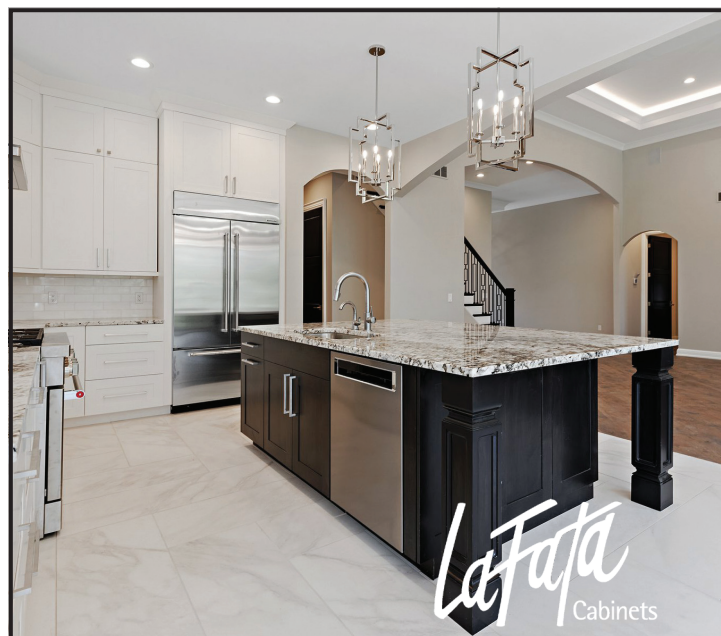
The students also learn arts and crafts and produce a variety of items that become products to sell in their store. “All of our kids deserve the opportunity to learn,” said Prentiss who knows not all students excel in the kitchen. As community outreach for the school, the Four Circles Store & Cafe is open 9 am to 1 pm Tuesday through Thursday, the products are all made by the students and can include photography, woodcrafts, knitted scarfs and of course, made-from-scratch-food. “Watch the Facebook page to see new products in the store being featured,” said Prentiss.

You can also find more ways to interact with the school through their website and social media. Their annual fundraiser Night Under the Stars is June 2. The event is a competition of sorts between 12-



14 cooking teams at the Eastern Market Shed 3, in Detroit. Culinary schools throughout Michigan are invited to compete as the highlight of the event.

For more on Rising Stars Academy, its store and fundraiser, visit the website rising-stars-academy.org.



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