

MOMENTUM

Uniquely Macomb County, Michigan

Volume 8, Issue 1

Down on the farm

Why the agriculture sector continues to grow, thrive

Page 14

REACHING FOR THE STARS:

Macomb County offers a hospitable home for niche entrepreneurs

Page 4

READY FOR RUGBY:

Warren club offers fun, friendship, healthy competition year round

Page 32



Focused on the future

Rising Stars Academy prepares adults with disabilities for careers in their communities

By Jane Peterson



Above and opposite page: Rising Stars Academy in Center Line provides postsecondary education to individuals ages 18-26 who have an intellectual disability. The Academy opened in 2011 with just 26 students and today serves more than 100.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RISING STARS ACADEMY

CONNECT

ABOUT RISING STARS ACADEMY

This is the time of year when many high school students make plans for the future. Any 12th grade student with a disability earning a certificate of completion is welcome to visit Rising Stars Academy and take a tour. They and their families can visit the facilities and see firsthand how lessons are taught and what kind of impact postsecondary education can have on young adults.

To schedule a tour, donate or partner with Rising Stars Academy or Rising Stars Foundation, visit rising-stars-academy.org.



At Rising Stars Academy, observers won't find college students with their heads buried in books, professors lecturing students in large auditoriums or young people stressing out over final exams. Instead, they'll watch as students train with community leaders, practice job skills in a hands-on environment and take pride in a job well done.

Rising Stars Academy in Center Line provides postsecondary education to individuals ages 18-26 who have an intellectual disability. The school opened in 2013 with just 26 students and today serves more than 100.

Co-founder Deborah Prentiss says the number of students enrolled in special education classes is at an all-time high. This makes the availability of postsecondary education even more critical as students exit high school in need of furthering their work-ready skills so they can turn their education into a career.

"We put away the paper and pencils. We are hands-on with our career training," she said. "The need is great and will only continue to grow. As we teach skills that students can use in the workforce, they are also learning about teamwork, dedication and how to work with others."

Rising Star Academy focuses on each student's abilities, not his or her disabilities.

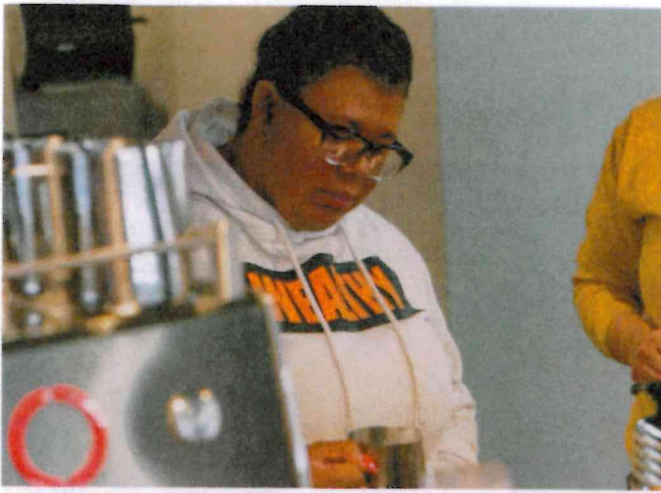
"We celebrate every little win we get," said Prentiss.

In addition to traditional classrooms, the school is equipped with a garden, aquaponics area, retail space, woodshop, bakery, food production facility, commercial kitchen and more where students learn practical work skills like how to set a table and accurately measure ingredients. They role play how to serve customers and what to do during a less-than-pleasant interaction with customers.

They learn cooking skills from Prentiss's husband, Mark, co-founder of Rising Stars and a professional chef who loves teaching and making connections with students.

The academy collaborates with many community partners throughout Macomb County. Some, like the ARC of Macomb County, provide additional resources for students. Others make donations or welcome students as part of external job site training. Many food service businesses have contracts with Rising Stars for students to bake slider buns, cut French fries or manage other food prep tasks. This allows restaurants to serve fresh products to their customers without all the prep work while at the same time providing students with work-ready skills.

Students train while spending their time in the academy. Ris-



Above, below: Rising Stars Academy students learn cooking skills from Mark Prentiss, co-founder of Rising Stars and a professional chef who loves teaching and making connections with students.

ing Stars Academy Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides work opportunities for adults with developmental disabilities, is a vendor for Macomb County Community Mental Health and provides skill-based training for consumers over 26. Consumers receive payment once they have completed training in the skill-based program. The foundation's latest project is Gathering + Grounds, a 4,000-square-foot coffee house that serves hot lattes, homemade bakery treats, tasty soups and fresh sandwiches bistro-style from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to noon Saturdays.

"It's a place where we will gather our community together to help the most underserved among us," said Prentiss, explaining that without viable social connections with others in an environment where they feel safe and loved, many adults with intellectual disabilities will retreat into the cyber world, where they feel comfortable using their cell phones and social media to communicate without leaving their homes.

Gathering + Grounds provides that non-judgmental place of belonging for these young people, whether they are there to socialize, eat or work. It also demonstrates to patrons just what these amazing young adults are capable of.

Prentiss said her hope is that Gathering + Grounds, which opened in April, can be replicated outside of Center Line as well.

Parents are thrilled to see their adult children thriving in



their independence and succeeding on the job, she said.

"Students are so proud of the fact that they can do these skills," she said. "For them, it's not just a job, it's that socio-emotional connection with others."

When COVID-19 hit back in 2020, the school shutdown was devastating for many special needs students and their families. Then, they started doing what they were trained to do - feed people. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, special needs adults at Rising Stars Academy assembled community meals, feeding breakfast, lunch and dinner that consisted of healthy choices like fruits, milk, vegetables and proteins, to those in need. While doing so, it helped participants maintain social interaction with others and ward off feelings of isolation.

They prepared more than 1 million meals for the community during that time, said Prentiss.

"We all have abilities and disabilities, things that we can do well and things that we don't do so well. When we focus on our abilities, we all shine," she said. ■