

LOCAL NEWS

Rising Stars helps developmentally disabled hone life skills

Gather + Grounds offers social skills development, work experience



Culinary students at the Rising Stars Academy in Center Line prepare meals for distribution. (PHOTO BY SUSAN SMILEY)



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In the 1967 classic film “To Sir With Love” teacher Mark Thackeray nixes textbooks and begins teaching his students life skills.

Rising Stars Academy founders Deborah and Mark Prentiss are using that same philosophy for their charter school and foundation that teaches work, life and social skills to intellectually and developmentally disabled students.

The Rising Star Academy charter school, located in Center Line, has 110 students between the ages of 18 and 26 years old; the Rising Star Home Hub community mental health skill building program for people who are ineligible for the academy because they have a high school diploma or are over 26 years old has 90 clients.

“We do teach money math because that is something they need to know – how to make change and things like that,” Deborah Prentiss said. “But we are really teaching job skills.”

The school has a 2.5 acre garden and small orchard complete with chickens where students can learn about agriculture.

There are opportunities to get hands-on experience with culinary arts, light carpentry, flower arranging, aquaponics, crafts and more.

“We have our retail store, which is being reworked right now, where we sell popcorn, goods made at the school bakery and artwork and crafts made by the students,” Prentiss said.

“Sometimes we make jellies and things like that too that we sell.”



The Gather + Grounds coffee bistro gives Rising Star Academy culinary students a chance to hone their social skills.(PHOTO BY SUSAN SMILEY)

Just a mile away from the campus, Gather + Grounds coffee bistro on Van Dyke Avenue in Center Line gives Rising Star students the chance to take their skills outside of the school building. The opportunity to develop social skills is equally as important — if not more so — than putting culinary skills to work.

“The hardest thing to teach these kids, which is why we developed Gather + Grounds, is social skills,” said Prentiss. “You can teach them a skill and they will do it day in and day out because they’re good at it, but they do not understand the social part of work.”

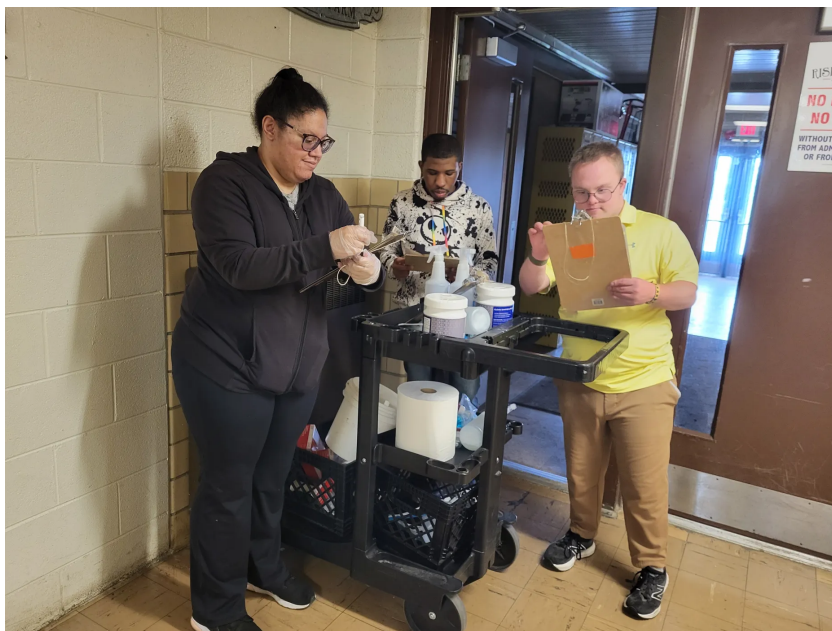
There are internal jobs for students including food production, cleaning, and clerical work in the school’s front office. Rising Stars also places students at remote job sites including Freedom Hill and various local restaurants.

The Donald Campbell Bakery within the school supplies bread and pastry products to many establishments including Green Dot Stables in Detroit, Comerica Park, Little Caesars Arena, Matt & Mo's Italian Beef in Hazel Park, Brown Iron Brewhouse in Royal Oak and The Godfrey Detroit hotel in Detroit.

On a typical afternoon, culinary students might be baking slider buns for Green Dot Stables in the facility's two walk-in ovens and rolling sub buns for Matt & Mo's. Just down the hall, food preparation students are making salad dressings and assembling snacks to be delivered to Beyond Juicery locations.

"We deliver 19,000 buns to Green Dot Stables per week," said Prentiss. "We are in the Hockeytown Cafe and we are working on getting a contract with Ford Field.

"This has really put Rising Stars on the map."



Students at the Rising Stars Academy in Center Line are responsible for cleaning areas of the school as part of their job skills training.(PHOTO BY SUSAN SMILEY)

Deborah and Mark Prentiss previously taught in the Warren Consolidated Schools district and started Rising Stars because they believed there was a void that needed to be filled.

"The state refers to us as an anomaly because there is no one quite like us," said Prentiss. "We do what we do."

Rising Stars Academy opened in 2013; Gather + Grounds opened in April of 2024 and is open Monday – Friday from 7 a.m. – 4 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. – noon.

For more information, visit rising-stars-academy.org or gather-grounds.com.

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