

The Language of Passion - Deaf Chefs take a 'can-do' attitude into the kitchen

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Deaf Chefs take a "can-do" attitude into the kitchen.

by Brenda R. Carlos

Members of Team Universal Orlando appreciated the smiles, congratulatory handshakes and pats on the back when they won the Florida State Champion title in the American Culinary Federation's junior hot-food team competition held in September 2003 in Orlando, Fla. But they couldn't hear the thunderous applause when the winners were announced. Members of Team Universal Orlando are deaf.

More than three months of meeting on their own time to hone knife skills and practice cooking techniques paid off when the team took top honors in a stiff competition against 13 other junior culinary teams. Their success proved the assertion of I. King Jordan, president of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., when he said, "deaf people can do anything except hear."

Team members came away from the competition with not only valuable experience but a shared bond. Even though they work for the same company and have their deafness in common, Universal Orlando has 12,000 employees, and most team members didn't know each other until they tried out for the team.

Steven Jayson, CEC, AAC, senior vice president and executive chef for Universal Orlando, came up with the idea of putting together a deaf team to compete at the junior level. "Universal strives to be a supportive employer, and in the culinary world, sponsoring culinary teams is a great way to provide extraordinary experiences for our staff," Jayson says. "For those of us who cook for a living, culinary competitions are one way to show our passion for what we do on a daily basis and to improve our cooking, baking and presentation skills."

Competitors all

Team member Brent Baisden started as a dishwasher at Universal and was given the opportunity to train as a cook. He attended Mid-Florida Tech in Orlando, was recognized as a top culinary student, and then returned to Universal Orlando. Today he works at Finnegan's, one of the park's 65 food-and-beverage venues. He is the only deaf employee at Finnegan's , but "I get along just fine," he says.

Competing, for Baisden, was a career highlight. "When we won first place in the Florida state competition, we were all so proud."

Two employees in Universal's bakery also made the team-Efrain Alicea and Maria Pinner. Pinner's favorite job in the bakery is cake decorating. "I've always been able to pick up new skills easily. Just show me," she says.

Alicea came to Universal Orlando armed with a degree in drafting and a 4.0 grade-point average. Despite those accomplishments, he couldn't find a job in the drafting field. "I knew that I was capable, and I was certainly eager to work" he says. "But no one would hire me."

Desperate for work, he took the advice of a friend and went to work as a dishwasher at Universal Orlando. "That was 12 years ago, and today I have found a rewarding career here," says Alicea. "I see myself continuing with this career and someday moving into a supervisory position. Why not? I like to teach and train, and I have a passion for this work."

Team leader Curt Hayward graduated from Gallaudet University and worked in law enforcement before deciding to follow his heart and attend culinary school. He was the first deaf student to attend Orlando-based Valencia Community College's culinary-management program. He completed an internship at Mythos Restaurant, one of Universal Orlando's fine-dining venues, and jumped at the chance to continue working there after graduation. Hayward is a first cook, and when the chef is away from the kitchen, he's in charge.

"My deafness hasn't affected my ability to supervise," he says. "We've made up all kinds of signs in order to communicate." someday, Hayward hopes to become an executive chef.

All members of the team are quick to show appreciation to their employer for making the competition experience possible.

"I never see myself leaving Universal Orlando," Alicea says. "I feel valued here, and with the opportunities to grow and develop through culinary competitions and other programs, there's no reason to take my career anywhere else."

Loyalty Counts

Alicea's remarks support what Allen Vaala, director for the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) Center on Employment in Rochester, N.Y., believes. "Statistics show that deaf employees tend to be more loyal than the average employee in terms of longevity in the workplace when they find an employer who understands their deafness, makes reasonable accommodations, and opens the doors to advancement," says Vaala.

He adds that disabled populations, on the whole, have a positive 'can-do' attitude, since they have had to prove themselves throughout their lives and are used to overcoming hurdles. Vaala spends much of his time working with top employers around the country, sharing the merits of hiring the deaf.

Stuart Slutzky, CEC, CCE, who teaches culinary arts at Wetchester Community College in White Plains, NY., was born deaf. He loved sophisticated foods at a young age and says he knew by the age of eight that he would someday become a chef. He agrees that deaf employees are loyal and hardworking.

"Most deaf people have a mission to accomplish, and that is to show the world that we can be as good, if not better than the majority of workers out there," Slutzky says. "The kitchen is a perfect workplace for the deaf. It is a very physical, time-devoting, constructive environment in which we thrive. It has order amid the chaos, and no two days are alike. I also think that most deaf people tend to be less distracted. We pick up on visual details and are able to apply them more readily than our hearing counterparts."

Slutzky worked as a sous chef while earning a bachelor's degree at NTID. After graduation, he became a kitchen manager for a restaurant in Boca Raton, Fla. "I was well received in terms of my ability and skills," he says. "I rarely had communication problem. The employees worked with me while I was training them, and we would help each other out. The majority of my employees were from Haiti, so I would teach them signs, and they would teach me Creole."

Let's communicate

Deaf people communicate in various ways; some are oral, some strictly sign and some use a combination of both. Mark Pfunter, who is hearing impaired, teaches deaf students at NTID and also teaches at a nearby community college and serves as an on-call food-and-beverage manager for the Hyatt Regency Rochester Hotel. He says throughout his career in the hospitality field, he has been faced with challenges similar to those experienced by deaf employees.

"I had to take the initiative to create my own success," he says. "In staff meetings I learned to sit in a specific seat where I had an open view of everyone. And there were times when I had to clarify issues later that weren't clear during the meeting. I had to pull my weight, because as a responsible manager, I was accountable for all the actions that fell under my department."

Tina Powers, CEC, CCE, bakery-arts instructor at the Institute for the Culinary Arts at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Neb., used to manage deaf employees in a bakery. "It didn't take me long to realize that I had to keep on my toes to stay up with them," she says. "As a whole, they were highly intelligent and great problem solvers. I left with such respect for deaf people in

general."

Certainly, the deaf population provides an important segment of the foodservice workforce. And employees should note that this group of loyal, eager and talented workers shares just one barrier—communication—that can be worked around.

Brenda Carlos is based in Omaha, Neb.

Working with Deaf Employees

The National Technical Institute for the Deaf provides the following tips:

- Ask deaf employees how they prefer to be approached so they are not startled.
- Install a light on the telephone to signal incoming calls.
- During training sessions, allow extra time for communication; refer to clear, concise written instructions; provide an outline of the session; provide scripts of films and videos in advance; and assign someone to work directly with deaf employees.
- Consider their communication needs in accessing information about career opportunities, and provide equal access to regular training required for promotions.
- Include them in conversations and work-break activities.
- Share informal information, distribute memos for social events, and ask them to help organize social events.
- Assign someone to alert deaf employees to emergency situations; install flashing lights to work in conjunction with auditory alarms; and review safety procedures including exits and alarms.
- Encourage deaf employees to wear specially colored hard hats in construction areas.
- Use TTY or a vibrating beeper to contact them in an emergency.
- Notify security when they are alone in work areas.