

# Careers Inspired: A Life Changing Experience

By Cynthia Whitney-Ward

While some high school students are going to movies and worrying about getting their driver's license, the students in the ProStart® program in Wisconsin are working on perfecting their recipes, honing their knife skills and planning for a career in the foodservice industry.

It has been a life-changing experience for many. Case in point is Cameron Anderson, an alumnus of the ProStart program at West Bend East High School. Before entering the program, Anderson was an under-achiever, making poor grades and just couldn't sit still in his classroom. Once enrolled in the ProStart program, he excelled, becoming a confident, motivated student who won a scholarship to the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School and will graduate this fall near the top of his class.

"I was well prepared for my classes at Le Cordon Bleu," says Anderson, who has consistently made honor roll. "My teacher at West Bend, Mrs. Heuer, was a great mentor; I worked in the school restaurant Nifty Nibble; and for over three years I applied what I learned in ProStart as a line cook in the Riverside Restaurant and Brewery in West Bend." Having that practical experience made all the difference, says Anderson, and actually working in the industry made him realize his true passion.

This innovative and dynamic two-year culinary arts and management program, operated by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association Education Foundation, educates and inspires more than 4,000 high school students in Wisconsin each year. Developed by the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation, the hands-on, industry-driven program has educated more than 90,000 students in 1,700 high schools nationwide over the past decade.

## Mentors have a huge impact

Anderson's experience showcases one of the key elements of this remarkable program: ProStart unites the industry and the classroom to create a unique and unparalleled experience for each student. The curriculum is designed to give hands-on, in-depth training in the culinary arts and management within the classroom, but also offers a minimum of 400 hours working outside the classroom within the industry. This practical experience and the role of mentors are integral to the success of the program.

"My mentors made all the difference," says Kendall Kelly, an alumna of Badger High School in Lake Geneva who is now attending the Culinary Institute of America in New York on a ProStart scholarship. She was lucky to have several key mentors along the way. "My mentor within the program was ProStart instructor Russ Tronsen; without his support, I wouldn't have succeeded. And I had several amazing local chefs as mentors. They made me realize that I wanted to cook for the rest of my life. It's inspiring to see professionals willing to take time out of their busy restaurants to mentor high school students."

"ProStart changed my career path completely," says Kelly. "I was considering a career in the performance arts and then I entered the program. It was demanding, challenging and consuming. I learned that taking risks can reap huge rewards. I was surprised how willing I was to spend every waking moment thinking about ProStart competitions and how willing I was to do just about anything to see my team succeed. I truly learned teamwork."





*Through the ProStart program, high school students are able to develop practical skills and knowledge that often give them an advantage as they enter college and the workforce.*

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**A surprising result: restaurateurs get back as much as they give**

Most mentors get involved in the program because they want to give back to the industry and help inspire the next generation. What they don't always expect is that they end up getting as much out of the experience as they give. Restaurateurs who participate in ProStart have found the experience to be beneficial to them both personally and to their business.

Brian Moran is chef at St. Paul Fish Company at the Milwaukee Public Market and has been a mentor for four years. He's been in the restaurant industry for more than 30 years and has been heavily involved with the local chapter of the American Culinary Federation. He mentors with Mary Kay Anderson's Shorewood High School

ProStart program and remembers being inspired by his own mentor when he attended culinary school. “He really encouraged me and was so calm and confident. He always gave everything a positive spin and helped me to evolve as a person. He understood that I was destined to be more.”

The caliber and depth of the ProStart curriculum, says Moran, was a real surprise. “I was really amazed at the technical skill level that was required of these students. And when they were planning and training for a competition, they dedicated a lot of time toward perfecting their menus and sourcing local food. They really parallel professionals in their skill level.”

And one of his favorite moments as a mentor happened when he loaned his personal French boning knife to a student who was preparing for a competition. “I'll never forget the look on his face when he used that knife. He felt what a really good chef can do with the right tool for the right job.”

Diane McKenzie, ProStart instructor at Madison's West High School has been fortunate to have the same mentor in her classes for three years. James Jens was a professional chef for 14 years and has worked with youth in 4-H culinary programs. “Jens truly elevates the expectations required to master the craft. He reinforces classroom learning, assists in developing culinary skills and techniques and helps competition teams to think outside the box. He gives students the big culinary picture.”

Chris Boettcher, GM at the Milwaukee Country Club has worked with the ProStart program for many years. “We've had a long-standing tradition of mentoring at the Country Club and I have personally fostered internship/mentoring programs throughout my career,” says Boettcher who likes to hire students who are studying the profession over someone just looking for a summer job because they show more passion. The bottom line, says Boettcher, is that their passion “juices up the staff and brings more excitement to our property.”

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*Thomas Owen (right), a recent Madison West High School ProStart graduate, with mentor David Heide (left), Executive Chef/Owner in the kitchen at Lilianna's in Fitchburg. Owen currently works at Lilianna's and is planning to attend Madison Area Technical College in the fall.*

**Bringing mentors and students together**

How are these amazing and dedicated mentors found and brought into the

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Former ProStart student Heather Sheets (left) had the opportunity to work hand-in-hand with Chef Brian Frakes (right) and other Marcus Hotel Executive Chefs to prepare a fantastic meal for hundreds of WRA Awards Dinner guests at the InterContinental in Milwaukee.

## WRA Education Foundation Supporting the Industry's Future through Education

ProStart is just one of the education-focused programs run by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association Education Foundation, a non-profit charitable organization. The vision of the Foundation is to advance professionalism through education, scholarships and community involvement to ensure the future success of the foodservice industry.

The Foundation promotes foodservice as a professional career path, attracting industry leaders by providing affordable, quality training and education for those already working in the industry. It is funded through donations, grants, sponsorships and program revenue.

Other Education Foundation programs include: ServSafe® food safety and alcohol training, endowments and scholarships, educational seminars and student competitions.



program? According to WRA EF ProStart and Mentoring Coordinator Bryan Mowry, it's very much a team effort. "Sometimes I assist in finding the mentors," says Mowry, who has been with ProStart for over four years, "and sometimes the teachers find them. It's a little more difficult in rural areas, but we work closely with each teacher to find a fit." And, says Mowry, the mentor can work within the school or the students can be hired to work directly with the mentor. But overall, mentors do demonstrations, serve on school advisory committees and work with the competition teams. "The mentors enrich the ProStart experience. They bring a different perspective, different teaching techniques and overall they bring that real life experience into the classroom."

### ProStart teachers: a key ingredient

The ProStart teachers are another key element in the success of the program, and Russ Tronsen, Culinary Arts-ProStart instructor at Badger High School in Lake Geneva has been essential to the success of more than 100 ProStart students. "I believe deeply in this program. I've seen how it changes students for the better, giving them a platform to shine as well as achieve

personal and professional goals. It gives them a purpose and a future."

Karen Sullivan has been a ProStart teacher at Sheboygan North High School for the past 11 years and believes that this program emulates everything that is exceptional about a quality education. "ProStart is very rigorous, incorporating all areas of the students' development—industry-determined skills and competencies; high level academic skills; and three national test/certifications. In addition to skills, students learn personal management, self discipline, team building and a highly-relevant curriculum."

The high-point of the program for Sullivan is seeing how the students grow and become successful in their endeavors and hearing about all the positive feedback from the school and community that is generated. "It's a very challenging program for all involved," says Sullivan, "but it is worth all the time and commitment when measured against each

student's success."

"The ProStart program is an integral part of our school," says Sally Heuer, ProStart instructor at West Bend West/East High School. "My ProStart students run our lab/restaurant—Nifty Nibble—three days a week. It's everyone's favorite place to eat! I see students shine here who might not shine in other areas of their schooling. Every hour of every day is a new experience for them."

### Developing future industry leaders

The ProStart program is truly an investment in the future for the



South Milwaukee ProStart competition team members. From left: Joey Mueller, Audra Fassbender, Marissa Vance and Kyle Novak demonstrated their culinary skills at the 2011 National Restaurant Association show in Chicago.

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foodservice industry. The passion and skills that the students develop through ProStart will serve them well in their careers whatever direction they choose.

Sun Prairie High alumna, Heather Sheets, is getting a Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management degree at Richland Community College, with plans to open her own restaurant and center where disadvantaged kids can come and learn to cook. "They can intern at my restaurant and go from there," says Sheets.

Erin Molzner, who just finished her junior year at University of Wisconsin-Stout, says that having been in ProStart put her ahead of the game when she got to college. "I came in better prepared and with more skills and knowledge than my classmates who didn't have my ProStart experience. The articulation of ProStart credits—quality institutions offer advanced placement and credit toward introductory classes—put me ahead a whole semester and saved me money."

Alum Mike Pane just completed his associate's degree at Madison College for Culinary Arts and is off to University of Wisconsin-Stout in the fall. When he graduates he plans on being a high school culinary teacher and would like to coach a ProStart team. "ProStart was a great experience for me. I loved the adrenaline rush I got from competing in the annual culinary competitions."

Those state-wide competitions—held

annually in March at the Wisconsin Restaurant Expo in Milwaukee—are a fundamental part of the ProStart curriculum. Teams participate in either the management or culinary divisions and prepare for the competition months in advance, honing both their individual and team-building skills. Winners receive local and national scholarships and go on to compete nationally.

And, according to Carlton L. Curtis, Chair of the NRA Educational Foundation Board of Trustees, ProStart is a smart investment in the hospitality industry's future. "The restaurant industry hires more people than any other and generates a half a billion dollars in revenue each year. Virtually every survey about the restaurant industry finds that consumers focus on three things: food quality, cost and service. Two of these are people driven," says Curtis who believes that industry support of ProStart will pay off in well-skilled workers and future industry leaders. In a nutshell, ProStart effectively combines cutting-edge education with real-world experience to develop the best and the brightest talent into tomorrow's skilled workforce.

Truly, Oliver Wendell Holmes captured the spirit and intent of the ProStart program when he penned: "One's mind, once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions." **WR**



### Be part of the success story

Industry support is crucial for the continued success of Wisconsin's ProStart program. Be part of building the next generation of hospitality industry employees. There are many ways to get involved:

- Mentor high school students—other mentors are available to talk to you about their experience
- Hire ProStart students and graduates in your business
- Sponsor a class by hosting a guest lecture, classroom demo or field trip
- Participate as a judge for competitions
- Donate to Wisconsin's ProStart program
- Fund scholarship endowment funds
- Support foundation fundraising events:
  - Celebration of Excellence (October)
  - Golf Classic (June)
  - Awards Dinner (March)
  - Online Auction (March)
- Spread the word: tell others about this remarkable program

Find out more at:  
[www.wirestaurant.org/ef/prostart](http://www.wirestaurant.org/ef/prostart)



2008 National ProStart Invitational Culinary competition champions from Badger High School in Lake Geneva. From left: Kendall Kelly, Clayton Maricle, Michael Pane and Jessica Bania.



The winning meal: gazpacho soup served in hand-carved cucumber cups, lobster salad with fennel and apple and a Knuckle Sandwich using lobster knuckle meat (starters), braised veal shank with cranberry and red wine reduction (entrée) and vanilla bean cannelloni made with hand-made sweet pasta dough (dessert).