

Hurst finds expression in the kitchen

Written by Richard Bist Special to the Democrat
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PENSACOLA — Artistic expression can take many forms, and Michael Hurst found his in the kitchen at Polonzo Bistro.

Despite having limited kitchen experience, it only took Hurst one year to move from an intern dishwasher to head chef. Now he spends his time creating breakfast and lunch dishes for an ever-growing clientele.

October is Disability Employment Awareness Month, and the Agency for Persons with Disabilities is highlighting the contributions of people with disabilities to the work force.

APD employment liaison Katrina Washington knew that Hurst had potential, even though he had limited employment experience. She went to Polonzo Bistro hoping to get Hurst an internship. What she didn't expect was the impression Hurst would have on his future employer.

Steve Turner, general manager of Polonzo, was drawn to Hurst. "Katrina called and asked if I'd be interested in meeting Michael. When I met him, he was such a soft-spoken, quiet guy. I figured I'd give him a chance and started him off on dishes."

Hurst took his new job seriously, making sure to always arrive on time and taking pride in his work. His dedication did not go unnoticed.

"They saw that I kept my area clean and that I was a quick learner, so they gave me a chance," Hurst said.

Turner was looking for a new chef when the previous one left after graduating from college.

"We were trying out new cooks, but none of them were working out," Turner explained. "So one day I was in the kitchen and saw Michael working on the dishes. I called him to come over and flip an egg. He flipped it like a pro, so I told him he was our new chef. Ever since then, he's been banging it out every day."

Hurst didn't let a lack of experience at the grill slow him down. In fact, the change came naturally, probably due to his artistic nature. In addition to working as a chef, Hurst plans to go back to school to major in art and eventually get his master's degree. His passion, he says, is drawing.

In the meantime, he'll continue to keep the Polonzo customers happy.

"Customers love him," Turner said, "and business has picked up dramatically since he's started cooking."

Hurst's success has led to doors opening for others. When Turner asked him if he knew of anyone who could help out in the kitchen, Hurst recommended his younger brother. Now the siblings work side by side.

Additionally, Turner has been so impressed with Michael that he's asked Washington to bring in more applicants with developmental disabilities.

Hurst is happy to have a job he loves and good people to work with.

“Before I was down because I couldn’t get a job and couldn’t support my family,” he explained. “But this job has given me a head’s up on life. Now I’m moving up.”

APD supports people with developmental disabilities to live and work in their communities. The agency annually serves more than 50,000 Floridians with autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, intellectual disabilities and Down syndrome. For more about the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, visit APDcares.org.