

Sauce ON THE Side



The Good People

by Michael Birchenall

Good people are just that way. It's in their DNA ... their every action. And it's not always the big things that make them such. This is not an over the top story ... but it is genuine and I guess that's why it sticks with me.

During their recent Public Affairs Conference in Washington, the National Restaurant Association held on Capitol Hill at Art and Soul a reception for NRA execs, member attendees from across the U.S. and members of Congress along with key staffers.

Invited were mixologists from DC to prepare specialty drinks and Art and Soul provided the food and staff. The NRA invited through our Restaurant Association of Maryland Education Foundation (RAMEF) eight of our ProStart kids who are learning culinary skills in Maryland schools. Ladeana Wentzel, RAMEF coordinator for ProStart went to her schools and brought to the event eight students from across the state, including Maryland ProStart student of the year Elinn Hesse, to assist in serving the event while talking about their ProStart experience to whoever would listen ... and they did.

Special guests included kids and representatives from Art Smith's Common Threads organization which teaches low-income children to cook wholesome and affordable meals. Common Threads believes that through hands-on cooking classes they can help prevent childhood obesity and reverse the trend of generations of non-cookers, while celebrating the cultural differences and the things people all over the world have in common.

When the ProStart kids arrived at the Liaison Hotel, the home of Art and Soul, they were greeted by chef Art Smith who spoke with them briefly – before leaving them with a platter of his delicious pecan squares. The kids were

briefed on their duties for the buffet service and given stations and tasks ... which included talking to the guests. All went well ... and many were engaged in conversations with NRA board members, congressional staffers and whoever would listen during the reception.

Art Smith who was visiting his restaurant from his Chicago base had overseen the event but left to take care of other duties when it got underway. Near the end of the event Art stopped by the lobby to see how things were going. Once again he spoke to the kids and took a few moments to pose for pictures before going out for his evening run. He then invited the



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kids to stay for dinner as his guest. He never went inside the room to network with the "important" folk. They were more than capable of a feel-good networking event without his help. It was a beautiful spring night and the eight ProStart students were seated in the outdoor café. When Art was returning from his run, he saw them and stopped by the table to check how things were going. Here is the part of the story that was told to me by Ladeana that has stuck with me. Art didn't do this so anyone could take notice of it ... there were no cameras, execs, important people or politicians, just Art and eight impressionable young culinarians. What he did was engage in a conversation with each one individually and personally. It's that one-on-one mentoring and dialogue that will leave an impression forever. And I'm convinced that these kids will remember to incorporate that lesson into their behavior and life work as they achieve success in their careers.

I happened to run into Art in Chicago at an Australian dinner during the NRA Show. He didn't know I was writing this column or even that I had been moved by his action. I did thank him as we were waiting for our cocktails in the busy bar. And he bought me a martini ... he really is a good guy.

And Speaking of Good People

I wrote about how the good people at Riderwood retirement community embarrassed us last year. Well they did it again. Whenever I see a large corporation or organization send out the self-congratulatory notice of a scholarship or two dedicated to a kid's college education, I think of this community of approximately 3,000 residents in Silver Spring. I admit I am not a good fundraiser ... I hate the "ask." And I marvel at how anything gets raised during hard times.

But here's the deal. Riderwood hires high school and college kids to work part-time (an average of 12 hours a week for two years) in their dining services ... which are rather extensive with that many residents. Every year since 2002, the residents on their own run a fundraising campaign for two months and this year 73 percent of the residents participated (yes, 73 percent!). They raised **\$215,555 for 39 high school students** from Montgomery and Prince George's County to assist them financially in their post-secondary education. You do the math ... that's over \$5,500 each for 39 students.

Fiona Divecha, the community's philanthropy manager said, "Most students are the first generation in their family to attend college." She added, "We, as a community, want to make an impact on the future of these young adults and feel we can do that by encouraging them to further their education. Not only do students receive scholarships at the end of their tenor at Riderwood, but our residents build relationships with them, ask them about school, and encourage them to keep working hard. Our residents are good role models for the young adults and serve as examples for what a good education can do for one's life."

More than \$1.5 million in scholarship monies since 2002 have been awarded to students who work part-time at Riderwood. Now, that's a whole lot of good people making a difference.

What have I done? What have you done?

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