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Serving Up Hope

Noted Chef Galen Sampson Offers Help for Troubled Lives by Teaching Culinary Skills

Stephanie Shapiro
 Baltimore Sun
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At the Dogwood Deli counter in Hampden, Jennifer Brock takes orders for breakfast burritos, whips up "Chai-huahua" smoothies, chats with customers.

In the kitchen, Tyrone Lewis chops 20 heads of cabbage for soup and slaw, while planning the day's specials and taking mental inventory of the bread supply.

Several years ago, neither Brock nor Lewis could have progressed beyond dead-end jobs in the restaurant business. Now, they practically run the bustling cafe. Both are former drug users who found recovery programs that in turn led them to Galen and Bridget Sampson, the deli's owners.

"Bridget and Galen are amazing. Amazing," says Brock, 35. They "not only gave me a good job, they treat you well and pay you well," she says. "I feel very valued here. I'm important. They depend on me to keep the front looking nice and they want a friendly atmosphere."

The Sampsons opened the Dogwood Deli three months ago. Already it has the comfortable feel of a neighborhood haunt where merchants and construction workers come for morning coffee and then again at lunchtime for a sandwich, or soup and salad.

With the deli, which will ultimately include Asta, an upscale, 120-seat dining room, Galen Sampson has realized his dream of operating his own restaurant.

For now, the deli's grilled chicken-portobello sandwiches and whimsically named smoothies are a far cry from the Hudson Valley foie gras in Riesling aspic with warm brioche and cloudberries Sampson had served at Hampton's, Harbor

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Court Hotel's five-star restaurant.

But the shift from haute to folksy is no indication that Sampson has left behind the joys and stresses of an ambitious kitchen. Since returning in 1997 to his hometown after a series of apprenticeships at elite resort restaurants from Utah to Bermuda and training at the Culinary Institute of America, Sampson advanced at Harbor Court to become its executive chef. He was a culinary luminary—with nothing more to learn.

It was time to switch roles.

Now, it is Sampson's turn to train new culinarians—while affording former drug users and convicts a fresh start in life. With his love of the food industry, a bit of "Smalltimore" good luck that brought Bridget into his life, and a commitment to social justice, Sampson is creating a sorely needed avenue for men and women transitioning back to society.

"I've always wanted to give back," says Sampson, a man with sandy red hair and a stolid presence. "I've been searching for a way to apply myself and my skills to make the most difference."

A \$48,750 grant from the Baltimore Community Fellowship Program, an initiative run by the Open Society Institute, gives Sampson, 41, the necessary support to launch Chefs in the Making. Just as Sampson sliced, diced and demi-glaced his way to chefdom, his class, including Brock and Lewis, will master skills much in demand in the burgeoning food industry. Those who complete both stages of the free, two-tiered program will qualify for certification testing by the American Culinary Federation.

Apprentices in Sampson's program won't have to duck flying ladles, as he once did when a temperamental chef lost patience with him on the first day on the job. He has an unflappable way of holding chaos at bay while juggling construction of a new restaurant, overseeing the cafe and designing the apprenticeship program.

Noting his "tendency to be very serious and hyper-focused," Sampson says friends often urge him to lighten up. The intensity he brought to preparing gourmet feasts is fueling his work with Baltimoreans who want to repair their lives. "A lot of this has to do with my belief, my faith," Sampson says. "You need to make a difference in your community."

At Harbor Court, Sampson instituted an in-house training program that allowed staff to forge a way out of a lifetime of menial jobs. One former dishwasher is now a sous chef at Morton's steakhouse on South Charles Street, Sampson says.

But he also heard horror stories from employees about relatives mired in drug addiction and the criminal justice system. "I got to know the staff and all the struggles you read about in the paper and think happen to somebody else," Sampson says.

Many of those who tried to extricate themselves were "having a hard time getting people to take a chance on them," he says. Often, they "got stuck going back to the way things were before."

Forming a Team

While contemplating his next professional step, Sampson met his future wife. It was his 39th birthday, and he and a colleague had stopped at Morton's for a drink. Bridget Muller, elegant, articulate, gregarious, was bartending.

Used to customers and their typical bar chatter, she remembers thinking, "This one's really different. Where the heck did he come from?" The two had "met cute" after working across the street from each other for eight years.

The couple's personal and professional goals fell quickly into place as they merged their strengths: Galen brought culinary and managerial talents to the table, and Bridget, a writer, brought her outgoing personality and background as a social activist.

In 2003, she had received her own Open Society fellowship to bring a literacy program to incarcerated mothers and their children. Through the prison ministry at St. Ignatius Roman Catholic Church, Bridget and another parishioner ran an outreach program for women who had been released from jail. She had also established a literacy program for kids in East Baltimore and often pitched in at the Sylvan Beach Foundation, a local vocational program for young men and women.

The Sampsons were married last year and live in Hampden. Early this year, Galen Sampson leased the space on West 36th Street once occupied by Mamie's Cafe. He left his job at Harbor Court about the same time the hotel was sold. Drawing inspiration and expertise from a number of local and national programs, the Sampsons unfolded their plan for a restaurant that would double as a training ground. Brock and Lewis, whom the Sampsons met through contacts at local recovery programs, were hired to help get the deli up and running.

The Sampsons, owners of two rescued border collies named Sox and Shoes, christened the deli in honor of the dogs they adore and the first tree they planted as a couple.

As their lives have braided together so completely, it has felt "like a guided journey," Bridget Sampson, 43, says. She's well aware that their effort to reverse the fortunes of so many lives may appear unrealistic. "I'm trying to make the world a better place, as corny as that may sound," she says.

When Bridget Sampson speaks to acquaintances of her ultimate goal—to open a community school where entire families can learn to put their lives together—she often gets "that look," Sampson says, peering over her lenses to mimic the dubious gaze of skeptics.

But others, including Diana Morris, director of the Open Society Institute in Baltimore, applaud the Sampsons' vision. Chefs in the Making, which will pay students as they learn, "is pretty exciting," she says. "It's very well-conceived. Galen has been thinking about it for over a year."

Sampson, often honored for his culinary gifts, "could do a million things with his life," Morris says. "This is exactly the kind of person we want to identify."

The Whole Package

Another supporter is Howard Wicker, director of Patrick Allison House, a residence for men in recovery from drug addiction and criminal activity. "Galen

brings a high level of professionalism and expertise. Bridget understands the whole dynamic of helping people. She has a reputation just as strong as Galen's, in social organizing," Wicker says. "When you partner that up, I don't care if they're going to sell candy apples, they still make a good team."

As the program's case manager, Wicker will assess applicants for their ability to stick with the program. He'll also monitor participants throughout the course. "We want to make sure that their health, their social environment, their financial situation, their family situation, legal situation, their mental and psychological situations are all in order, while teaching them how to become chefs," he says.

A resident of Patrick Allison House, Lewis, 43, met the Sampsons through Wicker. At the time, he had just relapsed in his effort to kick a drug habit and Wicker had contrived to invite the couple to dinner to discuss their plans for the program. Lewis, who inherited a love of cooking from his great-grandmother, had held a series of prep jobs in Baltimore restaurants. But his habit prevented him from getting any further. His meeting with the Sampsons gave Lewis the strength to enter rehab once again and stay clean, he says.

Now, he and Galen Sampson visit the Waverly farmers' market every Saturday, where they scope out the season's bounty and glean inspiration from mounds of squash, peppers and apples.

Lewis keeps the Dogwood Deli running for the Sampsons as they whirl from one task to another. He's also eager to start his apprenticeship. It's important, not "just to know how to cook, but how to make a kitchen work," Lewis says.

His opinion counts—that Lewis already knows. When talking shop with the Sampsons, they always ask, "What do you think?" Lewis says. "They made me see that what I think does matter. It makes a world of difference."

Galen Sampson

Education: Bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, Virginia Tech, 1987; professional certificate, Culinary Institute of America, 1995

strong>Apprenticed: Stein Eriksen Lodge in Deer Valley, Utah; The Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, Va.; and the Sonesta Beach Resort and Hotel in Bermuda

Favorite Dogwood Deli Smoothie: Green Pit Bull (parsley, banana, flaxseed, almonds, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, pineapple juice, soy milk, vanilla and protein powder)

Bridget Sampson

Education: Bachelor's degree in English literature, 1985, University of Virginia; master's in creative writing, fiction, Syracuse University, 1991

Published work includes: "The Love Song of Phillip Berrigan," an article about the Baltimore peace activist's life, appeared in Social Policy in 2003

Favorite Dogwood Deli Smoothie: Cherokee Monarch (mangoes, pineapple, banana and ginger)

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400 West 59th Street | New York, NY 10019, U.S.A. | Tel 1-212-548-0600

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