A few years ago, after a fire rendered his family homeless, Tico Mirambeaux’s thoughts were filled with things like deciding whether to spend another night at a friend’s place or in Eagle Park in Lowell. But today, having spent the last year working at Café UTEC in downtown Lowell, 22-year-old Mirambeaux has other things on his mind, like getting the meatballs and vegetarian chili ready in the morning, or the joy of preparing one of his specialties: buffalo chicken wraps. He also thinks about a future in the restaurant business—a future that, thanks to what he’s learned so far, he faces with newfound determination. “If I was to leave UTEC today, whether it’s as a prep cook or a line cook, in the kitchen I feel like I can do it all,” he says.

Café UTEC on Warren Street isn’t just a place for a passersby to walk in, glimpse the trendy chalkboard-scribed menu, and grab a banh mi or a quinoa salad on their lunch break. It’s an eatery manned by young adults in the midst of profound personal change. Under the auspices of UTEC—a nonprofit organization aimed at reaching young adults ages 17 to 25 in Lawrence, Haverhill, and Lowell, the vast majority of whom have histories involving gangs, court dates, and incarcerations—the café fits with the organization’s broader emphasis on providing education, support, and market-ready job training for what it calls “impact young adults.” In the café, these young adults are beginning careers with room for growth. And whether or not they spend the rest of their working lives in a kitchen or not, the skills they’re learning are indispensable.

“If you want to learn team-based leadership, reliability, dependability, and knowing your place and your value on a team, there’s no better place than a kitchen,” says Chris Austin, UTEC’s director of food enterprises for the past year and a 35-year veteran of restaurants and food service. Austin is quick to mention that the café intends to empower UTEC pupils to help them break free of low-ceiling restaurant work. “We want to give them the ability to go in and get that first leadership job, whether it’s a line lead or a shift lead at a small or large operation.
so they're not just slogging it out, going through entry-level after entry-level position."

UTEC, a nearly 20-year-old organization whose acronym stands for United Teen Equality Center, offers services ranging from mentorship and counseling to job training and social justice advocacy within its 20,000-square-foot LEED Platinum certified headquarters. Disenfranchised young adults find peers, positivity, and hard evidence that meaningful change is possible—83 percent of UTEC youth avoid arrest and 82 percent are employed two years after leaving the organization. A pillar of its approach is something the organization terms "social enterprises," a set of programs designed to give UTEC pupils foundational work skills through jobs ranging from mattress recycling—the entry point for UTEC newcomers—to woodworking and food services, which include a popular catering business, an on-site event service, and the café.

Café UTEC, located in the nonprofit's main facility, is arguably the most publicly visible of the culinary enterprises, all of which require entrants to complete at least five weeks of training in basic cooking techniques. When they begin working in the café, Austin says, young adults add more layers to their education: restaurant economics, customer service skills, and, ultimately, ServSafe Manager certification, a résumé-boosting food service credential. "We're really honing general and specific cooking skills, developing a culture around customer service, and then giving [the young adults] the knowledge of how a restaurant works," Austin adds. (He specifically calls Mirambeaux a "customer service star.")

The food is tasty, too. The café's offerings center on healthier fare and seasonally changing ingredients, from soups and build-your-own salads to turkey paninis and meatball subs to the aforementioned quinoa salad, a wildly popular dish made with roasted Brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, parsnips, and quinoa over arugula with Dijon vinaigrette. The specials offer young adults a chance to bring their own ideas to life; Austin says a recent special of off-the-panini-press chicken quesadillas flew out the door. And the prices are light on the wallet—a $7 sandwich is the priciest item on the menu.

There are harder-to-quantify benefits of working at Café UTEC, too, like an emerging spirit of benevolence and community service. In September, when the young adults in UTEC's kitchen received word that a Lawrence shelter was both occupied and lacking hot food in the days after the region's gas explosions, they immediately went to work cooking up and delivering some 60 plates of chicken, broccoli, ziti, salad, and rolls. "They stepped right up—it was completely their decision," Austin says. "There was no question or argument. It was just 'Let's go,' and it was a really beautiful thing to see."

For young adults like Tico Mirambeaux, a little café on Warren Street has been a backdrop for broad transformation. Café UTEC provides a path that points away from life's dim margins and toward a brighter, better future, validating lessons that UTEC has espoused all along. "UTEC as a whole, they help you with everything, not only with work skills," says Mirambeaux. "They help you with life. Period."

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