

Life Changing Eatery in Lowell

Café UTEC offers job training and team-based leadership to young adults.

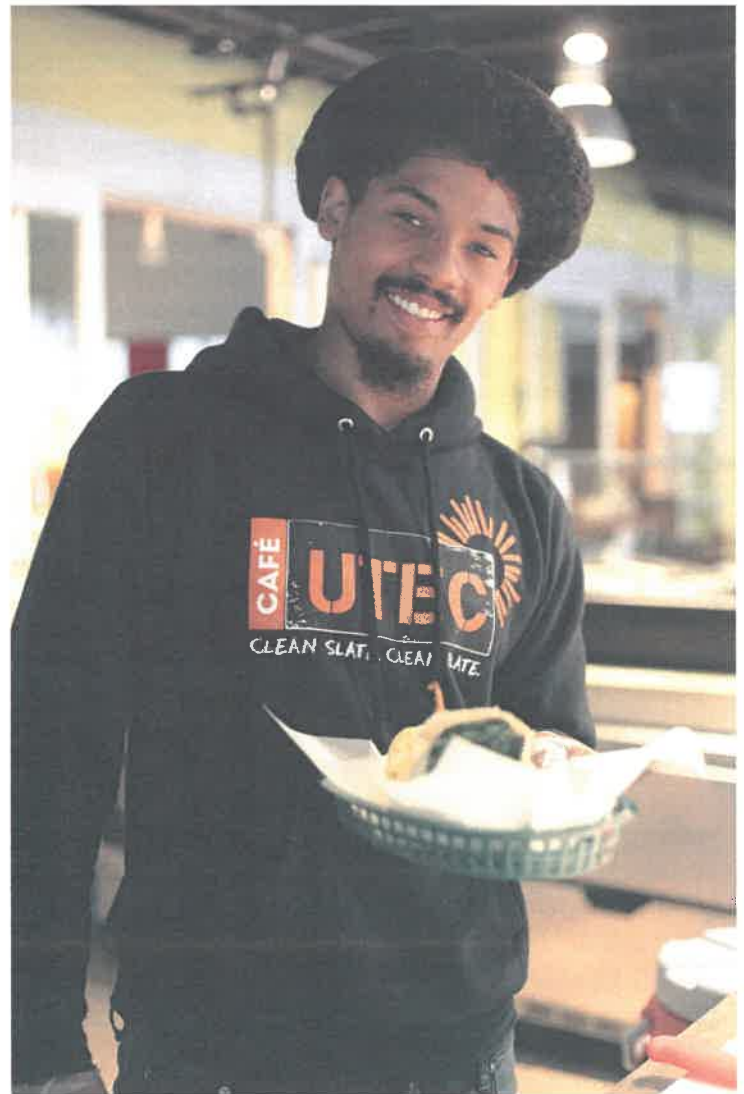
[JEFF HARDER](#) NOVEMBER 27, 2018

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



Photos by Christina Khem/UTECH

so they're not just slog-
ging it out, going through
entry-level after entry-
level position."

UTECH, a nearly 20-year-
old organization whose
acronym stands for Unit-
ed Teen Equality Center,
offers services ranging

from mentorship and
counseling to job training
and social justice advoca-
cacy within its 20,000-
square-foot LEED Plati-
num certified headquar-
ters. Disenfranchised
young adults find peers,
positivity, and hard evi-
dence that meaningful
change is possible—83
percent of UTECH youth
avoid arrest and 82 per-
cent are employed two
years after leaving the
organization. A pillar of
its approach is some-
thing the organization
terms "social enterpris-
es," a set of programs
designed to give UTECH
pupils foundational work
skills through jobs rang-

ing from mattress recy-
cling—the entry point for
UTECH newcomers—to
woodworking and food
services, which include a
popular catering busi-
ness, an on-site event
service, and the café.

Café UTECH, located in
the nonprofit's main fac-
ility, is arguably the most
publicly visible of the cul-
inary enterprises, all of
which require entrants to
complete at least five
weeks of training in
basic cooking tech-
niques. When they begin
working in the café, Aus-
tin says, young adults
add more layers to their
education: restaurant
economics, customer
service skills, and, ulti-
mately, ServSafe Man-
ager certification, a résu-
mé-boosting food ser-
vice credential. "We're
really honing general
and specific cooking
skills, developing a cul-
ture around customer

service, and then giving
[the young adults] the
knowledge of how a res-
taurant works," Austin
adds. (He specifically
calls Mirambeaux a
"customer service star.")

The food is tasty, too.
The café's offerings cen-
ter on healthier fare and
seasonally changing ingre-
dients, from soups
and build-your-own sal-
ads 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 quesadil-
las 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 work-
ing at Café UTECH, too,
like an emerging spirit of
benevolence and com-
munity service. In Sep-
tember, when the young
adults in UTECH's kitch-
ens received word that a
Lawrence shelter was
both occupied and lack-
ing hot food in the days
after the region's gas ex-
plosions, they immedi-
ately went to work cook-
ing up and delivering
some 60 plates of chick-
en broccoli ziti, salad,
and rolls. "They stepped
right up—it was com-
pletely 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 Ti-
co Mirambeaux, a little
café on Warren Street
has been a backdrop for
broad transformation.
Café UTECH provides a
path that points away
from life's dim margins
and toward a brighter,
better future, validating
lessons that UTECH has
espoused all along.
"UTECH as a whole, they
help you with everything,
not only with work skills,"
says Mirambeaux. "They
help you with life. Peri-
od."

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