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Front Row: Frank Estes, Southlake Buca di Beppo paisano partner; Frisco Buca di Beppo Chef Ray Nasri Second Row: CCCCD student Wayne Suarez; Jon Stewart, Frisco Buca di Beppo paisano partner; David LaFlash, Buca di Beppo division v.p.; Louis DiBella, Frisco Buca di Beppo assistant paisano partner photo courtesy of Collin County Community College

food for thought

by heather darrow

THE COLLIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT'S HOTEL/RESTAURANT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM wants to smash plates on a cold, hardwood floor to get your attention! They want to break the misconception that the food industry is full of low-paying, dead-end jobs.

"It is not unheard of for general managers in food service operations to be making six-figure salaries. You can be promoted very quickly in the industry because there are so many opportunities. If a person has skills and training, really the sky is the limit," said Karen Musa, CCCCD program chair of hospitality and food service management.

According to the Nov. 24, 2003 issue of Time magazine, the number one job in the nation as far as growth from 2000-2010 is food preparation and serving workers.

"This shows that there will be plenty of opportunities for management within the food service industry. These are multinational companies. They have quality assurance and purchasing departments, procurement departments and their own test kitchens. All restaurant chains have their own legal department. Jobs are available for graphic designers, architects, interior designers, attorneys and training managers," said Musa.

Knowing that many students have to work and attend school, the college offers day and night classes with new daily flex entry courses providing flexible scheduling. Students in the hotel/restaurant management program can choose one of three degree options including a hotel/restaurant management degree, culinary arts specialization or dietary manager specialization.

Working and earning credit simultaneously appealed to hotel/hospitality student Wayne Suarez, who completed his cooperative work experience at Buca di Beppo restaurant in Frisco, winner of the 2003 Taste of Frisco best main course (chicken with lemon).

"I think this is the best field because you get to see faces with smiles. It gives you a rush when people are happy. It is work, but it is fun. If you like a challenge, it is a great field to get into; there are new surprises everyday. People might think they are not going to make money, but in this business you can move up fast, depending on your work ethic. Every six months you can get bumped up another level. Once you complete a challenge, you get another challenge," said Suarez.

According to Jon Stewart, Paisano Partner of Buca di Beppo, Suarez is a prime example of moving up the ladder in a short period of time. He started as a server, became a bartender and is currently a guest relations coordinator.

"We have challenged Wayne with different levels of accountability. He has the guidelines from school, and he is hungry about the things he is learning. On the flip side, when he asks us something about a particular area of the restaurant, it refreshes your memory. It has helped our restaurant because we get with the rest of the staff and go over it," said Stewart.

If you ask Tracey Evers, executive director of the Greater Dallas Restaurant Association, if she feels that food service is a stagnant, low-paying field, she will say that is 100 percent opposite from the truth. Instead, she contends that the industry employs more than 11 million people nationally, making it the largest private sector employer in the country as well as the state of Texas.

"By the year 2005, the food service industry will need an additional 3.5 million employees. In the food service industry, rapid advancement is the rule, not the exception. The restaurant industry is a fast-paced, exciting business. The versatility, flexibility, pay and high levels of job satisfaction are all excellent reasons to choose this industry as a career," said Evers.

"I recently watched a general manager at a high volume chain restaurant drive away from a meeting in his brand new Porsche Carrera. I said to my colleague, 'Who says working in the restaurant industry is a dead-end job?'"

Heather Darrow is a writer for Collin County Community College District

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