

Ball High School program prepares students for restaurant, hospitality careers

By LAURA ELDER The Daily News | Posted: Thursday, March 24, 2016 12:00 am

Students early Tuesday morning watched as Kellie Rooks, a teacher's aide, carefully folded egg-roll wrappers around ground sausage.

As she prepared the experimental Italian egg rolls, Kellie's mother, Sherry Rooks, dropped them into hot oil to fry golden brown.

The students soon would commence a taste test to determine whether the Italian egg roll, served with marinara, would earn a place on the menu of their proposed food truck, Tuffy's Island Bites.

And the next day, the students would calculate the costs of making the egg rolls, considering ingredients, labor and overhead, before deciding how to price them.

The students are enrolled in Sherry Rooks' Restaurant Management class and could be a small part of the solution to a big, pernicious problem plaguing area restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions — a shortage of labor. The students need experience and the restaurants need enthusiastic workers.

Before Sherry Rooks became the director three years ago, Ball High School's Hospitality Program had become stagnant.

"It was pretty much a dead program," Rooks said. "There wasn't a lot of interest."

Whole new recipe

But Tuesday, as multicultural egg rolls sizzled in a pan, a group of engaged, ambitious students exchanged ideas, including the possibility of a food-truck-throw down on the island.

With the support of her boss, Eric J. Paul, district coordinator for Career and Technical Education, Rooks has made significant inroads in reviving the program.

She works closely with Paul Schultz, president of Galveston Hotel & Lodging Association and vice



Ball High Class could help with local labor shortage

Sherry Rooks, a hospitality teacher at Ball High School, pours her homemade marinara over an Italian egg roll Tuesday in one of her restaurant management classes. Students in the class plan to serve the egg roll and other items from a food truck they plan to launch next year.

president of hospitality for Landry's, which operates the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier and restaurants on the island. Landry's owner, island-born billionaire Tilman Fertitta is a principal in Fertitta Hospitality, which owns the 16-story San Luis Resort.

During Rooks' tenure, students have formed Ball High's Hospitality Club, learning skills necessary to work in the tourism industry.

Club members complete courses in hotel management, restaurant management and principles of hospitality and work three-day rotations during the week at The San Luis Resort, Hilton Galveston Island Resort, Holiday Inn Resort and IHOP restaurant, all Landry's or Fertitta properties.

While at the sites, students spend three weeks at a job including culinary work, guest service, management, marketing and sales before rotating to another service area.

Four times during the year, the Galveston Hotel Lodging Association hosts the club at a hotel to hone student skills in different focus areas.

Seeking partners

Rooks hopes to increase the number of hotels and restaurants offering places for her students to learn and to forge a similar relationship with the Galveston Restaurant Association and area restaurant owners.

She'd like each of her classes and students to have a place to gain real-world experience. And the students aren't just getting experience at the lowest rungs of the industry ladder, she said.

"We've taken them from washing dishes and making beds to being able to spend time with Paul Schultz and learn how to be a manager," Rooks said. "Yes, someone has to make the beds and do the dishes, but we're pointing them in a managerial direction."

Rooks earlier this month reinforced her efforts to increase her students' experience at island restaurants, while also trying to involve more restaurant owners in her classes, after reading an article in The Daily News.

"It lit a fire," she said.

In that March 10 article with the headline "Nobody Wants to Work," some restaurant owners lamented they couldn't find enough employees and were forced to cut hours and stop some services altogether.

Rooks wanted to introduce those restaurateurs to her students and programs. After reading the article, she reached out to some of those restaurant owners. At least one has shown interest in working with her students, she said.

Already employed

Some of Rooks' students already work at island restaurants, where they are able to apply their knowledge about food temperatures, safe food handling and other lessons.

Student Ricky Hernandez, 16, works at La King's Confectionery in the island's downtown.

Hernandez, a sophomore, learned through his work at La King's about calibrating thermometers and temperature gauges. He returned to class and learned more about it by reading books offered in the program.

Hernandez hopes to one day own his own restaurant on the island, he said. But first, he'll gain experience working at someone else's restaurant, he said.

"I do want to branch out and travel the world, and see what there is to see," Hernandez said.

Diamond Smith, 16, is planning to apply to work at Chick-fil-A Express, which Fertitta plans to open across from the Galveston Island Historic Pleasure Pier, 2501 Seawall Blvd.

Juanita Benavides, 16, works at McDonald's on Broadway in Galveston. The Restaurant Management class has taught her to cook, she said.

"Now I cook at home," said Benavides, who plans to take hospitality courses next year at Ball High School.

Jacoby Barnes, 17, has always loved to cook, which led him to the Restaurant Management class.

"It's my strongest passion," Barnes said. "I've always wanted to own a hotel with a restaurant in it."

Almost all the students said they planned to continue their restaurant management education in college.

It's a start

By all accounts, the Italian egg roll was a hit. So was a vegetarian version created at the urging of student Leticia Casillas, 18, who hopes to eventually open a vegetarian-friendly restaurant, possibly on the island.

Rooks has applied for a \$125,000 grant through the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, for the food truck. She'll learn Sept. 1 whether it was approved.

The department awards such grants with the idea that students involved in such endeavors are more likely to stay off the streets and out of trouble.

While Ball High School's restaurant and hospitality course won't solve the island labor shortage, it's a start, Rooks said.

"One day, current managers on the island will retire," Rooks said. "Who's going to replace them?"