

Ocean County Vocational Technical School

Working in the Field

Sharing Success Stories



Student: Nicolas McLellan
OCVTS Program: Culinary Arts
Instructor: Chef Gary Lesniak
Employer: Rush Creek Resort, Yosemite, CA

Class of: 2014
Center: Brick
High School: Brick Township

In Nicolas' own words... In my young career, I have been fortunate to have many mentors, chefs in the professional field, the classroom, and even some on TV (shout out to Chef Mario Batali). The one who stands out the most is Chef Gary Lesniak at OCVTS. He really pushed me, along with fellow students, to always do things a little better than the day before, and always do them right. I fondly remember rolling some pasta out a bit too short one day and him saying, "If you're gonna do fresh pasta, make sure you do it *right*." Just one of the many pieces of wisdom I received from him and the entire OCVTS staff! Chef Gary also taught me the value of professionalism in the kitchen, as well as having a sense of humor to get through the tougher days. Some other keen memories I share with Chef would be him helping me train for a scholarship competition at Walnut Hill College, which we ended up winning 3rd place. Another great memory is when Chefs Kevin and Bruce took me and a handful of students to New York City to eat until we had to be "rolled out" of the Casa Mono Restaurant.

From the halls of OCVTS, I continued my education at Walnut Hill College, a smaller culinary school in Philadelphia. Three years flew by, having made many connections both personally and professionally, it was the right choice of schools. One of the first jobs I had was a cook at The Farmacy, with another mentor, Chef Ross Scofield. He gave me the chance to host a charity dinner in honor of my mom that benefitted the National MS Society, in which we raised \$2,000. Chef Ross also taught me that when combined, food and charity is an extremely powerful thing. Graduating with my Bachelor's Degree in Culinary Arts was definitely a big step and an achievement in itself, but what is better than traveling with your knives? I mention traveling because after graduating, I ended up moving to Yosemite, California where I now work as a line cook at the Rush Creek Lodge Resort. In April, one of my Chef Instructors, Tim McLean, began to push me to travel and work in a resort for numerous reasons, so I did just that! A few phone interviews and a plane ticket purchase later, here I am!

The beauty of this career path is that if you have a good attitude, sharp knives, and a willingness to have numerous experiences, you can cook anywhere your heart desires. For me, the city life was fun to cook in, but not as rewarding or as beautiful as cooking next to a forest. From NJ, to Philly, to California, my journey is just beginning. I can say that none of this could have been possible without the teaching, mentoring, and friendship that Chef Gary has provided to me. I sincerely thank him and OCVTS for giving me a platform to really flourish in this field!

Chef Gary nominated Nick as a success story and proudly attended the benefit dinner (*photo left*). "Nick was a great student, always willing to help, always prepared for class and always stayed up to date with today's top chefs. Nick has come back to OCVTS offering help with Feed the Need project and as a judge at our regional SkillsUSA competition. We are all thrilled that he is living the dream!"



Nick at the entrance to Rush Creek Resort, Yosemite, CA.