

Seasoned Caterer Mentors Hearing Impaired Cooking Staff



Chef William A. Coleman III and owner Jay Blackford of Catered Elegance.

By Laurie Bailey

For the last six years, the professional staff of Catered Elegance has prepared events for the likes of UPMC, the Easter Seals Society, Adagio Health and the Pittsburgh Aids Task Force. And walk into the kitchen of this well-oiled machine hours before an affair, and you'll see there's a flurry of activity, focused chefs and, at times, a lot of gab. But despite simultaneous deadlines and careful attention perfection, it's a reasonably quiet place. All eight cooks at the Wilkinsburg-based business are either deaf or hearing impaired. "Sometimes signing can suck up a lot of time," said Chef William A. Coleman III. "As a supervisor, I need to be encouraging and keep them working." Coleman, also deaf, has been with Catered Elegance for four years. He learned most of what he knows about the food industry from the company's owner, Jay Blackford.

Blackford became involved with the deaf community four years ago when he found his business growing in leaps and bounds. "I was cooking in three separate floors of my home, and within 18 months, my foyer was full of catering equipment," said the seasoned caterer who gained the bulk of his experience at five-diamond Ritz Carlton Hotels. With a vision to grow, Blackford bought the 7,000-square-foot former Smith Bakery building two blocks away. A friend at the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce suggested he seek personnel assistance from the deaf community, specifically from a program through Goodwill of Southwestern Pennsylvania that provides career development services and the appropriate experience for employment. Coleman, the father of a teenage son who is also deaf, interviewed with Blackford through that program. Blackford admitted he knew nothing about American Sign Language when he first met Coleman. He was more impressed with Coleman's professional demeanor, impeccably ironed white shirt and perfect posture than he was with his kitchen experience. But he hired Coleman, starting him out as a motivated, tenacious dishwasher. "He became a chef through my mentoring," said Blackford.

Now the two are best of friends. In addition to his work at Catered Elegance, Coleman is a full-time student at Kaplan Career Institute studying marketing. And, thanks in part to an 8-week American Sign Language class that was a 50th birthday gift from Coleman, Blackford has learned to sign. "Hiring (the deaf employees) has helped my company grow and me to grow personally," said Blackford, adding that his employees are loyal and love their working environment. They often show up for work 15 to 30 minutes early.

Blackford is so devoted to his hearing-impaired staff, he's tailored much of how he does business to help them efficiently do their jobs. One of the biggest ongoing challenges he faces is communication, especially when it comes to explaining how he wants food prepared and displayed. So he photographed completed food trays to use as a reference. "Their visual sense is so much stronger than ours," he said.

He's also adapted his building to be friendly for people who are hearing impaired. Fire alarms and door bells with flashers are in the kitchen and office. He installed a Sorenson Video Relay Service that allows the hard of hearing to communicate with hearing family and friends by a video phone and high-speed internet connection. "I've actually received clients because of my deaf staff. They are wowed by what we do," he said. "I want the deaf people to go with me to events, like weddings, and encourage them to get out of their comfort zone," said Coleman who accompanies Blackford to food tastings. While preparing and presenting a dish to a potential client, Coleman usually "steals the show" and customers insist he be at the event.

Blackford admitted he derives a great deal of satisfaction from taking time from his day to mentor his cooking staff. Perhaps, it's because that's how he received his own training. Constantly picking the brains of the Ritz Carlton chefs for whom he worked in the 80s and 90s, Blackford would work hours beyond his shifts, volunteering to help a pastry chef to make 600 plates of sugar pulled flowers, or he would assist on plating up a dinner for hundreds of guests.

"It's my passion," he said, stressing the positive experiences he's had, cooking for and with several high profile celebrities. In the early 90s, he recalled Julia Child easing herself into the kitchen at the Ritz Carlton in Houston, Texas where Blackford and other chefs were preparing a 7-course dinner. "She told stories of her past while she was cooking and made us feel very comfortable," he said. While working at Ritz Carltons in Atlanta, Georgia and Naples, Florida, Blackford shared several conversations with comedian Bill Cosby who taught him the perfect way to froth a cappuccino.

Now, he's passed his gifts of talent and patience on to his own staff. William Coleman expressed he enjoys everything about the food industry, from the cooking to the sales and marketing. "Right now I'm working as a top chef and I enjoy coaching and motivating people like me," he said. Blackford plans on continually supporting the deaf community, through his mentoring and employment efforts and his participation in various local organizations. However, as with many independent business owners, Blackford is faced with the possibility of closing Catered Elegance due to the current economy, despite his popularity and booked calendar. "The catering business I have found is one of the hardest hit during this recession and I am always looking for new avenues of marketing to capture new business so I can continue offering the deaf community skills in the hospitality business.

To contact Catered Elegance, call 412-731-0416 or visit the website, www.cateredelegance.net.