

NEWSLETTER

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A fruitful partnership

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The catering teams in St John's College and Girton College have partnered with Cambridge Mencap and Huntingdonshire Regional College to give students with learning disabilities valuable work experience. The *Newsletter* spent a day in St John's to see the students in action.

Cooking up a future

PASTRY CHEF Tim Robinson is standing at a large countertop in the kitchen in St John's College, chopping fruit for that evening's dessert. Across from him, two Huntingdonshire Regional College (HRC) students, Abbie, 18, and Lucy, 24, are buttering slices of bread for sandwiches that will be served later in the College bar.

Lucy, Abbie and Tim work together every Thursday: the students help with the prep work for everything from pancakes to fruit salads to tarts and have become a valued part of the kitchen team.

Abbie likes to tease Tim; Tim likes to tease Abbie. Later in the day they'll have a light hearted debate over who is more of a 'cheeky monkey'.

Sue Ridley, an instructor for HRC, hovers nearby, helping to keep Abbie and Lucy on task. They both have Down's Syndrome and joined the catering course through the auspices of Cambridge Mencap, a charity which assists people with learning disabilities.

Tim is full of praise for them. "They're lovely," he says, and smiles in their direction, knowing they are listening. "They really are a great help and are very capable. I don't know what I'd do without them."

The young women are not immune to flattery. Smiles bloom on their faces as Tim makes his comments, even as their hands keep busy buttering the bread.

Cambridge Mencap has been arranging for HRC students with learning disabilities to work in the Catering Department at St John's since 2001. The programme was expanded to include Girton College in 2003. This year, seven HRC students are at St John's, working on a three-year City & Guilds

Hospitality and Catering course. At Girton, three students are on a three-year Hospitality and Catering course. On both courses, the students work three days a week.

Bill Brogan, St John's Catering and Conference Manager, says the arrangement has been a beneficial one, for all involved. "Our team like the Mencap students and get on well with them. It's excellent to see them come here and develop," he says. "It's a good working partnership."

A typical day

The students arrive about 8:30am. They change into their black Cambridge Mencap uniforms and are ready by 9am for HRC Tutor Jeanette Popham to begin their formal instruction.

The College has provided a small room near the kitchen which serves as an office and classroom. The class sits around a single table that gets pulled into the middle of the room.



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The room also has two computers for students to use. The walls are covered with bright displays on topics such as food safety and nutrition.

Today is a special day for student James, 19, because he has an interview with the Buttery Manager for a casual position in the plate wash. The job would mean working shifts when the Buttery was particularly busy. The prospect fills James with pride.

"I can picture myself wearing one of those uniforms," he says, sitting up a little straighter as he speaks.

The lesson for the five students today is learning and reinforcing the meanings of signs and symbols the students are likely to encounter when working in catering. HRC Tutor Jeanette and Instructor Sue gently guide them through a game of dominoes, played with cards that depict safety symbols and their meanings.

By 9:30, Jeanette has read out the day's assignments. James heads to the plate wash, his favourite, and spends the day ensuring that cutlery, glasses and plates are spotless. Chris L, 26, will work in the Buttery, first cleaning and preparing the dining area for students and staff, and later, serving jacket potatoes from behind

Huntingdonshire Regional College student James says the plate wash is his favourite task when working in St John's College's Catering Department. He graduated from his City & Guilds Hospitality and Catering course on the 25 June.



the buffet. Chris T, 19, is sent to the Combination Room, where he assists with setting 58 places for lunch. Lucy and Abbie head to their kitchen duty.

“This time of year we just supervise,” Jeanette says. In September, the instructors – which include Sam Cooper, a learning support assistant – are much more hands-on, demonstrating the tasks and doing them right alongside the students.

Routine and structure is important for students with learning disabilities, Jeanette says, but the real world can be a bit messy, especially

when the College has dinners and event scheduled that add to the workload. “In catering, you can’t always have that routine,” she says. “It’s really good for the students to gain experience in a real working environment.”

It’s an experience that student Chris L really appreciates. “It gives you a real sense of achievement,” he says, explaining that he can suffer from anxiety. “That’s part of the reason I come here. It helps. The days go by quite fast.”

He is wiping down the counters in the Buttery, where sunlight is streaming down through the sky

lights. “My favourite place is here,” he says. “I like doing the cleaning. It’s lovely in the Buttery. This time of day it’s quite quiet.”

Jeanette’s goal for each student is to train them to work to the best of their ability. Some will go on to independent employment; others may work on a volunteer basis. She says her students have a lot to offer. “They are incredibly motivated and are here every day, ready to work,” she says.

Soon after 2pm, the students have changed out of their uniforms and returned to the classroom in blue jeans and sweatshirts. They each complete a job diary, summing up their tasks for the day, and their tutors work individually with them on skills such as spelling and maths, part of the overall curriculum for the course. As a group, they review the safety symbols from the morning.

At 3pm, it’s time for the class to shoulder their backpacks and say goodbye to Sue and Jeanette for the day. James stays behind, to talk through his job offer with Jeanette. Abbie, Lucy, Chris and Chris walk out together into the cobbled courtyard, passing through several knots of Johnian students as they head towards the College’s medieval gate onto Trinity Street.

Left, St John’s Pastry Chef Tim Robinson works alongside catering students Lucy and Abbie, while the students’ Huntingdonshire Regional College Instructor, Sue Ridley, looks on. Below left, student Chris T helps restock the St John’s Buttery with the help of HRC learning support assistant Sam Cooper. Below, right, HRC Tutor Jeanette Popham oversees Chris L as he cleans in the College Buttery.



PHOTOS BY PHILIP MYNOTT