

# Advocacy, Mentoring and More on the BCA Menu as *FE&S* goes Face-to-Face with Alex Askew

By Joseph Carbonara, Editor in Chief -- Foodservice Equipment & Supplies, 9/26/2008 7:22:00 AM

Research shows that finding and retaining qualified employees remains one of the biggest challenges for all members of the foodservice industry. One organization trying to address that need in its own unique way is the BCA. Based in New York City, the BCA has evolved from strictly a culinary association comprised of CIA graduates to an organization that advocates mentoring and helping young people of color develop career paths in the foodservice and hospitality fields.



*FE&S* went face-to-face with **Alex Askew**, a driving force within the BCA to learn more about the organization's progress to date and plans for the future.

***FE&S:* How has the BCA evolved since you first got involved?**

**AA:** We were advocating one dimension instead of multiple dimensions. We used to focus on the culinary aspect and we now focus on everything that encompasses hospitality. That's important because this encompasses the entire operation. It's important to know all the aspects of foodservice and hospitality so you know how it impacts what you are creating for the customer and what goes into it. We used to promote a couple of schools, like the CIA. But today we promote and support sound education and training whether it's in a community college or a culinary school or anywhere else. Now we are expanding into certification so people understand they are hiring a qualified professional. Another major point is education awareness and exposure.

***FE&S:* Following this evolution, how has the scope of what the BCA does changed?**

**AA:** With our founders being African Americans who graduated from the CIA, the organization's next step is exploring the areas of commonality and identity that exist among all peoples of color. This will help with advancement of all people of color, (Native American, Asian American, Hispanic, Black) in the area of diversity. We realize this is an organic approach to change that is not being discussed in the industry at the moment.

***FE&S:* I know you're doing more with Native Americans. What prompted the BCA to get more involved with this particular group?**

**AA:** Young Native Americans aspiring to go to hospitality school could not locate the funds to do so. That was astounding to me and why we got involved with the Native American Culinary Association. In addition, the contributions made by Native Americans to the food culture we enjoy today should not go unrecognized.

**FE&S: What are some of the lessons you've learned by working with Native American culinary professionals?**

**AA:** Long before it's cooked, they are concerned with how the animals are being taken care of, how the vegetables are grown, etc. They see good vibrations coming from that and I think it's a powerful message. There's definitely some synergy between the organizations and the by-product will be the advancement of diversity.

**FE&S: What are the organization's longer-term, bigger picture goals?**

**AA:** The longer-term vision is to put more emphasis around mentoring. How many foodservice entities help create a road map for someone else to follow and steer them in that direction? I don't see many and that's why you see so many companies hire from outside the industry. The next step would be a young student exchange program that would extend beyond people of color. We would take them and place them in a program somewhere abroad and that would help impact their perspective. And doing it with an emphasis on food would show how humanity would be interconnected. It helps create a common ground for discussion. The great opportunities in my lifetime came about as a result of my abilities to talk about food. It shows that you are culturally aware and have the ability to learn.

**FE&S: What's the image you'd like to project to the foodservice industry at-large?**

**AA:** The recommendation to the industry is culinary and hospitality excellence. The landscape of the industry is changing so what are we going to do to change our mindset? We are not going to define what it means to be of color. We don't want to define every aspect of diversity. That's not our goal.

**FE&S: How have members reacted to the changes?**

**AA:** The majority have been extremely positive. What's become really popular this year, are student chapters on various college and university campuses. This is great for us but we need to keep explaining the evolution of things. We don't advocate just having a black organization. We want it to be multi-cultural. It's the next step. Some people know us as a solidarity organization that supports one goal. But really, we support multiple goals. You have to be open. There are levels or sensitivity involved but unless we talk about these issues they will never become less sensitive. Some people don't want to talk about these issues. Some don't want to associate themselves with people of color. You should be able to say you are an African American or a Jewish American and share ideas as such. This will allow us to elevate the conversation. There needs to be a balance with understanding what's transpired and building a strategy for the future.

**FE&S: One of your organization's hallmark programs is a black tie awards ceremony. How does the BCA and the young people it helps benefit from this?**

**AA:** The media asks me where are all the professionals of color and they ask this question as if culinary professionals of color don't exist. We have to make some changes to create some visibility for these professionals to serve as role models and to let people know we are out there. What you see is what you become. Prior to our annual event, we have a closed-door reception with the students where they can meet with the ACF to

learn what they need to know to move forward and achieve culinary excellence. And these steps are ones we need to take to drive a more diverse industry makeup.

***FE&S:***                    **Why**                    **a**                    **black**                    **tie?**

**AA:** The black tie signifies elegance. It represents pride. And it projects a certain standard of accomplishment to the young people. For those reasons this will always be a black tie event. That's what we as an organization continue to strive to do: package that message of excellence that these young people need to strive for.

***FE&S:*** **How are you incorporating foodservice equipment and supplies into your message?**

**AA:** The restaurant equipment side is terribly important to our future success. There's technology and all other sorts of opportunities on the horizon. We need to explore all angles of this side of the business from a diversity perspective. We advocate to students that you can have a career in the hospitality industry even if you don't want to be a chef. And that if you want to have a career in this industry, you have to know all sides of it.