

# Mentoring Matters

**By Howard “Kamau” Stanford, Guest Author -- Foodservice Equipment & Supplies, 3/1/2008**

Few could argue that the foodservice industry has never been more popular. The National Restaurant Association reports that a whopping 48 percent of the average household's food dollar is spent on meals prepared outside of the home, representing a trend that shows no signs of slowing down. And thanks to the Food Network, the culinary arts have never been more en vogue.

But the Food Network has done more than educate the average consumer about the wide variety of food available, preparation styles and the cultural history behind them. Simultaneously, it is creating an army of perspective culinary professionals by presenting our industry as a viable alternative for their creative side, and these students range in age from high school to retirees.

Though this is great for our industry, it has generated an interesting set of challenges: 1) how do they translate this passion into a meaningful, rewarding and successful career, 2) what tools do they need to survive in this business and compete with the professionals in the field, 3) where can they learn to use cutting-edge professional/commercial equipment, and 4) what other opportunities and careers are available for chefs? Unless they have a well-seasoned executive chef in their pocket, chances are they won't have a map to guide them to a thriving professional culinary career.

These days there is no shortage of culinary school commercials, but many of these institutions are basically trade schools educating students to cook. You can bet most students figure they have all they need when they complete the curriculum but the culinary world is extremely complex and competitive; thousands of people vying for hundreds of positions. Understanding there's a business component involved no matter what industry segment you choose increases your professional worth.

While mentorship programs are relevant to all men and women, it's even more important to people of color entering this field. The BCA, a national non-profit culinary/hospitality mentoring organization, dedicates its time to motivate urban-challenged high school students by introducing them to the culinary arts, foodservice and hospitality as a viable career option. By providing direction and networking opportunities early in the career choices of



**[Howard “Kamau” Stanford](#)**, NOMA, BCA  
BCA Board Chair  
Kamau Sage &  
Associates,  
Foodservice Consultants  
Indianapolis

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students at the high school level, to and through college, we can help create a path toward the professions of their choice.

It's our responsibility to expose them to opportunities in the manufacturing, consulting, distribution and service segments. Very few if any culinary students realize most commercial and high-end residential cooking equipment manufacturers have executive chefs on their staffs, as well as healthcare facilities, corporate headquarters and cruise lines to name a few. Students need to appreciate and understand all aspects of business, such as financial and employee management, purchasing, design, the importance of teamwork and networking prior to entering the workforce.

Our investment is in the future of the students we mentor and setting the groundwork for career building — it's about education at the root of learning. Diversity begins with a strong foundation and work ethic. The earlier students begin the process, the more tools, experience and professionally qualified the workforce.

To sustain the overall growth of our industry, mentoring programs are the key to providing qualified professional candidates for employment as well as successful entrepreneurs.

The BCA represents one of many industry associations helping to identify and cultivate the next generation of foodservice professionals. Donate your time and expertise to work with one of these organizations to mentor an aspiring foodservice professional.