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Cape Fear Profile: Chef Gregg Hamm serves and teaches food

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Staff photo by Johnny Horne

Posted: Saturday, March 28, 2015 7:57 pm | Updated: 8:18 am, Sun Mar 29, 2015.

By Steve DeVane Staff writer

SANFORD - Education and food are Gregg Hamm's inspirations.

Combined, they give him a bustling daily life spent in four counties building strong, family-like bonds through the restaurants he owns, the college where he oversees culinary training and the generosity he shares with others.

He's a chef who owns restaurants in Sanford and Raleigh, along with a catering operation. He's also executive director of Central Carolina Community College's Culinary Institute.

And he uniquely provides assistance to charitable causes in Sanford through time, talent and resources.

"My interest is food, but my passion is education," he says.

Hamm wears typical chef's garb with a black hat, black shirt and colorful pants marked with images of food. Keys on a key chain made from a fork jingle as he moves with purpose from one task to another.

Friends and colleagues, especially his employees, add another description: he's interested and passionate about people.

The 40-year-old is neither a foodie nor a critic. Beneath the predawn to post-sunset busyness and the persona known as "Chef Hamm" lies a calm, easy-going gentleman who'd just as soon enjoy a delicious dinner as

Cape Fear Profile: Chef Gregg Hamm serves and teaches food

Chef Gregg Hamm keeps an eye on one of his culinary students who slices prime rib for a lunch for a board meeting at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center in Sanford.



Gregg Hamm

Chef

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Owens Chef Hamm Inc., which includes Cafe 121, Suite 121, Venue 121, all in downtown Sanford; P.G. Werth's in Raleigh; and a catering operation out of both his Sanford and Raleigh locations.

Executive director of Central Carolina Community College's Culinary Institute, overseeing culinary training, cafes and catering at Central Carolina's Sanford and Pittsboro campuses, and soon its Dunn location.

make one.

Raised in the northwestern mountains of Alleghany County, he earned a culinary degree in South Carolina and came to Lee County as a high school teacher. His willingness as an eighth-grader to help at a football concession stand has only multiplied, impacting a countless number.

Life has been good to Hamm. He's paid it forward, with a vision of still more to come.

Community ties

Hamm attributes his success to support from residents and feels a responsibility to give back to the community. He lives in a condo in Raleigh and still owns a house in Lee County.

"He believes when we all work together, we're stronger," Jan Hayes said of his support for nonprofit organizations. She's executive director for United Way of Lee County.

Hamm donated half his Sanford restaurant's profit on

Friday nights during a United Way promotion a few years ago. Handing out gift certificates and holding events is another way he helps the organization and its volunteers.

"We can't afford the kind of things Gregg enables us to do," Hayes said.

Teresa Kelly, executive director of Christians United Outreach Center of Lee County, said Hamm helps her organization put on a banquet for its volunteers. Kelly's group, which provides food for needy families, gets some of what's served at the banquet through donations.

Hamm always makes it a delicacy, no matter the food donated, Kelly said. Once, Hamm turned pizza rolls into bread sticks, she said.

"I couldn't figure out what he'd do," she said. "It was perfect."

Regina Minter-Hargett, a culinary instructor at Central Carolina Community College, said Hamm also contributes to an animal rescue group. She said he is the type who has never met a stranger.

"Everybody he meets tends to remember him," she said. "He's a very memorable person."

Natural start

"I spent most of the time in the kitchen with my grandmothers," Hamm said of growing up in the northwestern North Carolina community of Sparta and the nearby southwestern Virginia town of Independence. He never played sports and only participated in a few musical activities.

His family, which included 20 cousins, grew a lot of their food. That influence is reflected in the Culinary Institute's curriculum, which has a natural element and focuses on "farm to table" food preparation.

When Hamm was in eighth grade, his school didn't have classes that taught food preparation, so he volunteered to work in the concession stand at high school football games.

Mickey Todd, a teacher at the school, said Hamm stuck his head in the booth one night and asked if he could help. She said, "Sure," and handed him a spatula to flip burgers.

"I always tease him, 'Here you are a master chef and you started flipping burgers,'" Todd said.

At the end of Hamm's first night volunteering, Patricia Werth, another teacher, indicated she thought Hamm was in one of Todd's classes.

"She said, 'You've got a really good kid there,'" Todd said. "I said, 'What do you mean? I thought he was your kid.'"

The high school teachers kept the middle schooler.

"He was just an exceptional young man," Todd said.

In high school, Hamm took Werth's culinary classes. A mentorship was formed, and today his Raleigh restaurant bears her name. Werth died in a 2002 automobile accident.

"Once he got into that program, you could tell he had an affinity for it," Todd said.

Hamm said Werth convinced him to enter a recipe contest from Johnson and Wales University in Rhode Island. He won the top award, which came with a \$40,000 scholarship. And he went on to graduate from the school's

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Charleston, South Carolina, campus.

"It was a big turning point in my life," he said. "When you win something like that, you realize, I can do this."

Hamm had wanted to teach kindergarten or elementary school.

"I realized that I still wanted to teach, but I'd teach food," he said.

Excellent choice.

Motivator

After graduation, Hamm got a job teaching culinary classes at Lee County High School. He taught there for 12 years, leaving to start the culinary program for the community college four years ago.

Minter-Hargett was a student of Hamm's before becoming an instructor.

"He's the one who inspired me to pursue a career in culinary," she said.

Lucy Dubiel was in Hamm's class in high school and community college. She is now manager of Cafe 121 in Sanford, where several of his other former students also work.

"He's more like a father figure and a boss," she said.

Brodie Hill, who will graduate from Central Carolina in May, took a Hamm course on menu design.

"Since he owns his own restaurants, he does really know things you don't get from books," she said.

T.E. Marchant, president of the college, said culinary arts has become an up and coming profession. The program Hamm has started is unique in its emphasis on natural food preparation, Marchant said. Pamela Senegal, vice president of economic and community development at the college, is Hamm's supervisor. She said the school was having a hard time finding a company to run the cafeteria until Hamm suggested students in the culinary program run it.

"He understands how exposure to the culinary program has the potential to change lives like it did for him," she said.

Brian Merritt, vice president of student learning at the school, said Hamm's energy is amazing.

"He never stops," Merritt said.

"It just seems like he's everywhere all the time," Marchant said. "I really don't know when he has time to sleep."

No time to waste

Sleeping isn't a priority for Hamm. His day usually starts about 4:30 a.m. and ends after 9 p.m. Seven days a week is the norm.

His weekdays start with walking his dog around downtown Raleigh, where he has a condo. He goes to the farmers market for fresh produce and dairy products for his restaurants, then heads to Cafe 121, arriving around 6:10 a.m.

The restaurant opens at 6:30 a.m. for coffee and pastries. By 7, he's reviewing the upcoming day with Dubiel.

Then it's off to either the Pittsboro or Sanford campus of Central Carolina, followed by a trip to the other. Recently, many of his days have included meetings in Dunn to help plan for the opening of the new location.

He usually finishes the meetings by 3p.m., but they can last until 5 or 6p.m. Then it's back to P.G. Werth's in Raleigh, often till closing.

"I'm in four counties almost every day," he said.

On weekends, Hamm is usually at the Sanford restaurant on Saturday and P.G. Werth's on Sunday. He also might work at a wedding or other catering event on Saturday.

Hamm said he's able to keep up his schedule because his dog is his only immediate family.

"I love what I do," he said.

Busy loner

Hamm said most people see the outgoing part of his personality known as "Chef Hamm." The other side - Gregg - would just as soon stay home with his dog or go to a movie or have a quiet dinner by himself.

"If I go out, I'm Gregg," he said. "I don't want people to say, 'That's the guy who owns that restaurant.' I'm a lot more of a loner."

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Posted: March 30

When he goes to a wedding, he's happy to sit back in a corner. He doesn't critique other caterers. Nor does he consider himself a food critic.

"I really enjoy dining as an experience," he said.

Hamm's appreciation for food was at one time more noticeable. Twelve years ago, he weighed 365 pounds. He lost 150 pounds, gained 90 pounds of it back, then lost 75 pounds.

"If you've never battled it, you don't understand," he said.

Hamm had never exercised, but the day after his 10th high school reunion, he joined a gym. He said the decision was not directly related to the reunion, but "something just clicked" that made him realize he needed to be healthier.

"I just wanted to get in shape for the first time in my life," he said.

He wants the workers at the restaurants to have a sense of ownership in the businesses. He said he plans to give them to his former students when he retires.

"I have family in the mountains, but here, they are my family," he said. "That's why I work so much."

And there are no immediate plans to slow down.

"I've always said and believed that the restaurant business is all or nothing," he said. "I'm afraid if I don't give it my all, it'll become nothing."

Staff writer Steve DeVane can be reached at devanes@fayobserver.com or 486-3572.

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