

Hotel Workers Rising

By Lenore Balliro, MA Worker Education Roundtable

Tucked into the third floor of one of Boston's graceful old brick buildings, the Local 26/Hotel Training Center (HTC) offers a welcoming and practical space for gaining and improving workplace skills in the hospitality industry. A tour reveals layers of the Center's functions and purposes. Airy, well-lit classrooms provide space for students learning English as a second language, reading and writing skills, citizenship, and computer skills. And to put those skills to use within a real-life context, the Center has set up a model hotel room. A guest room, complete with bed, linens, and a full bathroom, allows students to apply the vocabulary, idioms, job functions, and literacy skills necessary to work as a room attendant at one of the area hotels. A nearby space reveals a banquet room with elegant table settings. In this banquet room, however, a blackboard and posters on the walls promote the integration of learning and doing. Through study and hands-on experience, students at the HTC can receive certification training as a Professional Room Attendant, Professional Busser-Server, Professional Basic Culinary Skills, Food Safety, and Professional On-call Banquet Server. Industry specific trainings resulting in national certifications are also taught in food safety, responsible serving of alcohol, CPR, and first aid.



Mbarka, a recent graduate of the HTC, displays her skills.

BEST Corp

As collaboration among BEST Corp., a non-profit workforce training organization, UNITE HERE Local 26, and participating hotel employers, classes at the Center are funded through the Greater Boston Hotel Employees (GBHE) Local 26 Trust Funds. About 22 hotels participate in the fund, one of the many benefits of Local 26 members.

BEST Corp. also works with community residents to prepare them for entry-level work in the hotel industry. In this capacity, BEST Corp. has established alliances with community-based ABE and ESOL providers and job readiness programs, offering "next step" job training opportunities to their learners as well as Local 26 members who want to upgrade their skills. Once they hire on at a union hotel, students can continue with all the education and training benefits offered by BEST Corp. Outside grants (including SkillWorks, the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF), English for New Bostonians, the Boston Foundation, the Neighborhood Jobs Trust and Boston Connects) have funded career coaching, ESOL classes and skills training classes for non-incumbents.

The evolution of BEST Corp. illustrates the creativity, resourcefulness, and skills of its director, Marie Downey, MSW. As a former banquet server, Marie became involved in her union, Local 26, at the

request of one of her coworkers. She explained that Local 26 has a long history of involving members in the collective bargaining process. When it is time to renew contracts, members create committees to discuss their most pressing concerns.

“In 1986, what was on the top of peoples’ minds was learning English,” Marie said. “There was a large immigrant population then, as there is now, and room attendants make up the biggest part of the hotel industry. Immigrants are the backbone of the industry. So funding for English classes was included in the next collective bargaining cycle.”



Priscilla Enamorado displays her work in a culinary arts class

In addition, Local 26 received “seed money” from the state of Massachusetts as part of a statewide workplace education project. In collaboration with the Education Development Group (BEST Corp’s predecessor), Local 26 began offering ESOL, GED, Citizenship, and Computer classes at the Local 26 Union Hall. A rapidly evolving industry necessitated a re-visioning of the workplace education program.

In 2004, with funding from the GBHE Local 26 Trust Fund, BEST Corp started up as an independent non-profit organization with a mission to analyze and respond to the educational needs of workers in the hospitality industry. ESOL classes were treated as a priority and viewed as an important component of a broader scope of services within the context of workforce development. It wasn’t easy to make BEST Corp’s vision a reality. But the

steadfastness and creative leadership of Downey, and the continued commitment on the part of Local 26 and the participating GBHE hotel employers to provide education support for their members, ensured BEST Corp’s current success.

Attentive to varied funding streams to boost the budget, Downey wrote proposals and received grants from the Massachusetts Workforce Training Fund, WCTF, the Department of Industrial Accidents, SkillWorks and English for New Bostonians.

The Students

Michelle came to the United States from Taishan Province in mainland China three years ago. Her first job at a nonunion Boston hotel paid poorly and offered no benefits. She enrolled in the housekeeping training at the HTC and soon after completing it she was hired at a union hotel, where the workers are represented by Local 26. “This one is better,” she said. “Before I made less than \$9.00 for one hour. Now I make more than \$15.00 for one hour. I have benefits here too, but before I didn’t. I can take classes, too, and they are free for me because I am part of Local 26.”

Michelle continued to take advantage of her education benefits after she completed the housekeeping training, and it has paid off. She recently passed the citizenship test with the help of the citizenship class at the HTC. She is studying for her GED now. In addition, Michelle was invited to co-teach the housekeeping training classes for new students, where she teaches them to clean rooms and tests them on their new knowledge. Her experience and enthusiasm is benefitting others beyond herself.



Students study at the HTC:

Mya, who came to the U.S from Burma, first enrolled in the culinary class at the HTC and received her certificate in 2008. This credential helped her to get a job in the kitchen of a union hotel. As a Local 26 member, she, like Michelle, continues to take classes. “I want to speak English very well,” she says, “so I took the ESOL level 2, now I am at level 4 and 5.” Mya also took classes in financial literacy and is interested in buying a house with her husband, Nyunt, who works in the hotel industry and studies at the Center. One of Mya’s benefits through Local 26 is a \$10,000 grant for the purchase of a first home.

Soon Mya became interested in learning computer skills as well. “They taught me computer skills,” she explained, “and now I’m a paid computer assistant there! Mbarka is another HTC client. “The moment I put my feet here, all the doors opened for me,” Mbarka told me when I asked her about her experiences at the HTC.

“When I graduated from the room attendant program, the hotels came to the graduation, and I was hired at the moment.” she said.

Mbarka loves her job at the hotel, but her passion is for cooking and she is pursuing her dream of working as a chef. She has recently completed the culinary program at HTC. The mother of three children, Mbarka learned to cook, like most Moroccan women, at nine years old, and has always loved it. Mbarka has been pleased to weave her expertise in Moroccan cuisine with the skills she learned in the HTC classes. For example, at the Room Attendant program graduation, Mbarka created and served Moroccan pies filled with fish or chicken. The staff still talks about her cooking with a dreamy look in their eyes. “I feel I am exposing them to my culture,” she said, and that makes me feel good.”

The HTC means more to Mbarka than preparing for and getting employment.

“This place is changing my life,” she said. I’m very truthful from all my heart. When I first came here, I was lost—what I am going to do?” When she was referred to the HTC she found acceptance, support, and practical skills beyond what she imagined.

“I came here without friends; I found friends. I came here without a job; I found a job. I came here without an education; I found an education,” Mbarka said. “This place is home. Everybody is accepted.”

Like many students at the HTC, Mbarka received encouragement to follow her dream of continuing her education and training beyond the HTC. “My teacher Mary encouraged us to study more about cooking, and took us to Bunker Hill,” Mbarka said. “There was somebody from the Boston PIC (an HTC partner) at orientation to help us. And today I passed my midterm with an A+!” Mbarka will enroll in five classes, a full course load, at Bunker Hill in the fall, balancing her work and class schedule. She is also taking advanced English and Math classes at SCALE in Somerville in preparation for her new course demands.

“I couldn’t do this without them,” Mbarka said of the HTC.

Mbarka recalled how a former student, who went on to study at the Cordon bleu, visited the culinary class, at the HTC to discuss his career path. His story inspired Mbarka.

“I want to get a BA at the Cordon Bleu,” she said. Maybe I can do an internship in France. I want to expose people to nice, healthy, organic food.”

Michelle, Mya, and Mbarka are just three examples of UNITE/HERE Local 26 members who have taken advantage of the learning opportunities at BEST Corp. They and many of their coworkers are showing that what some have considered a “dead end” job in the hospitality industry can actually be the first step on a satisfying and well-paid career ladder.