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Spotlight: Chef & Instructor Santos Nieves

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Over the years, we've had the pleasure of seeing the success of Chef Santos Nieves' culinary skills and teaching, which has been very evident from the six RI ProStart Competition winning teams he's coached, the 2014 RI Hospitality Education

Foundation Teacher of the Year Award and the 2022 ACF RI Chef of the Year Award. As the culinary instructor at William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School in Lincoln since 2012, he's greatly impacted the lives of young students for over a decade. We sat down with him to learn more about his story, passions and Hispanic roots:

"I was raised in the mountain regions of Puerto Rico surrounded by farm animals, mangoes, plantains, and avocados. Our family didn't have an abundance of financial resources; however, I've never recall going hungry. Unbeknownst to me, my connection with the land gave me a deep-rooted appreciation and respect for all food products. This became the foundation of my culinary journey.

When I was 18 years old and pursuing a degree in restaurant management I took a cooking course. That was the moment when I decided that I would love to become a chef. After I finished my degree in restaurant management, I packed my bag, and came to Providence, Rhode Island; with \$350 and a heart full of hope and aspiration to attend Johnson & Wales University and become a chef. A few weeks after I arrived in Providence, the money vanished but my hopes and my aspirations were still there.

In 1990, I enrolled at Johnson & Wales University and in 1994 I received my Bachelor's Degree in Culinary Arts. From 1995 to 2000, I worked at the Johnson & Wales Inn, in Seekonk, Massachusetts. I held positions as an à la carte restaurant chef, banquet chef, purchaser, and eventually, Executive Sous Chef under Executive Chef Ken Watt. While working, I also acquired my Master's Degree in Education from Johnson & Wales University. I worked for Sodexo at Salve Regina University as an Executive Chef until 2010. Then I spent about two years teaching culinary arts at Exeter Job Corps Center. In 2012, I was very fortunate to become a Culinary Instructor at William M. Davies Jr. Career and Technical High School in Lincoln, Rhode Island. I have been at Davies ever since and I love what I do.

I have a passion for cooking. I enjoy mentoring and teaching young adults. To me, the most rewarding feeling is to see the growth of my students as they transform from kids to responsible young adults capable of pursuing a career in foodservice or move up onto college. I always say to my students; "I am not teaching you how to cook. You are becoming a better person through learning how to cook." I encourage my students to not forget the human element in the food service industry, although it's true that we need to make money to sustain a business, humans will always be the most important part of the industry. I encourage them to please cultivate and strengthen relationships with their co-workers. They will be there for you when you need them the most.

My intention back in 1989 was to come to the United States, get my associate degree in Culinary Arts and return to Puerto Rico. 33 years later, I am still in Rhode Island, married to a brilliant woman, and a proud father of three girls. I always say, I am a Chef by trade but my profession is being a Dad, not only to my three daughters but to all the students that I have had the opportunity to serve. Although I am very proud of my Puerto Rican roots, I consider myself a citizen of the world.”

Chef Santos also told us he enjoys vegetable gardening, pig roasting and considers himself an amateur beekeeper. We look forward to seeing Chef Santos’ students in action at upcoming ProStart competitions and working together with him to build the next generation of foodservice professionals.

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