

## Recipe for success

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James Froncek is riveted by ribs.

"That's my favorite food," he said.

Froncek is involved in a new program that he hopes will improve his cooking skills and teach him how to make some delicious ribs in the process.

The 24-year-old is one of the students involved in the OASIS pilot program offered through a partnership between Erie Homes for Children and Adults Inc. and Mercyhurst North East.

The initiative provides an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in college-level culinary classes at Mercyhurst North East with other students and earn a culinary assistant certificate or a baking assistant certificate.

From there, the goal is that the participants will find jobs in the food-service industry.

The program also offers the students the chance to experience college life, something Froncek is already enjoying. The program started last week and Froncek, who is autistic, said he's met new friends.

"It feels good," he said. "I love college better than high school."

He also expects to become a better cook.

"Who knows? Maybe I'll have my own restaurant."

A goal with the program is that it will give the students the chance to develop a culinary career and live independently, said Tamie Tregaskis, community program specialist with Erie Homes for Children and Adults.

The nonprofit offers residential and community services for children and adults with developmental disabilities.

EHCA received a \$46,500 grant from the Orris C. Hirtzel and Beatrice Dewey Hirtzel Memorial Foundation to develop the program and approached Mercyhurst College about being a partner, Tregaskis said.

The grant provides for a graduate assistant, Brent Martin, to oversee the program, scholarships, job development and paid mentors, who are current students who will assist the OASIS students in classes and help them learn more about the campus, Tregaskis said.

Eight students are now involved in the OASIS program. They are high school graduates and are ages 18 to 35.

In the classes, participants will learn culinary skills, and cooking and baking principles. They also will be taught about food-service sanitation requirements. The program will involve three semesters of study and plans are to develop internships for the students.

Beth Ann Sheldon, director of the hospitality management department at Mercyhurst North East, is excited about the possibilities that the program will offer students.

“The hospitality field, especially the culinary field, does hire people with intellectual disabilities but they tend to leave them in very low-level positions. And many of them are capable of more, they just need training,” Sheldon said. “And the industry is so understaffed that there is a need for these workers.”

“My hope for the program and what I’m hoping to see is all eight of them to complete the program and get jobs, just like any of my graduates,” she said.

Participant Stephanie Konen has a recipe for career success. Konen, who has a bipolar disorder, wants to build on the cooking skills she has now and land a job as a baker at Giant Eagle.

Cooking is fun for her and so is the chance to experience campus life.

“I’m excited about being in college,” Konen, 25, said.

## **MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAM AND INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

OASIS is a pilot program offered through Mercyhurst North East and funded by a grant given to Erie Homes for Children and Adults Inc.

It stands for Opportunities and Advancement for Students with Intellectual Disabilities for Self-Actualization.

Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills, according to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

For more information about the OASIS program, visit [www.ehca.org](http://www.ehca.org).



Program provides opportunities to build culinary career **GREG WOHLFORD/Erie Times-News**

Mercyhurst North East culinary students Michael Ross and Stephanie Konen listen as Chef Dennis Dunne leads a culinary class at Mercyhurst North East.



**GREG WOHLFORD/Erie Times-News** Mercyhurst North East Chef Dennis Dunne, right, shows the proper way to peel a tomato during a basic culinary class at the school on Wednesday. There are 10 students currently in the program.