



Inaugural SmartStart Summit Engages Younger Students in Exploring Career Options through SkillsUSA Massachusetts

In just a few months, Jared Munguia will enroll at Rutgers University to study technology and informatics, supported with a full scholarship.

He credits experiences gained through SkillsUSA Massachusetts as a big part of his success. In particular, he walked into a required presentation for the scholarship, feeling so prepared from lessons learned from his concentration on technology categories. “I was ‘I’m ready for this,’ because SkillsUSA taught me the necessary skills to really be good at that,” said Munguia, a senior at Lynn Vocational Technical Institute (LVTI).

Now, Munguia is doing his part to help other students find their way to SkillsUSA quickly and easily, so they don’t miss a beat in taking advantage of those same game-changing opportunities.

That’s one reason Munguia joined dozens of seniors and other veteran students to participate in the SmartStart Summit, a new program rolled out by SkillsUSA Massachusetts to better reach and engage students as early as their eighth-grade year. The program featured a keynote address, while upper-class students served as mentors and hosted booths that promoted different elements that students can pursue in their SkillsUSA experience.

SmartStart provides a dedicated program for eighth and ninth graders, who likely aren’t advanced enough in their skills training to secure a state competition slot outside of leadership categories.

“Our whole chapter came together to design the booth, to think about what it should look like and to showcase our commitment to community service and helping other people,” said Jason McCuish, advisor at LVTI, which brought 16 eighth- and ninth-grade students and five student facilitators to SmartStart. “That allowed the upperclassmen to work closely with the underclassmen in a meaningful way. That’s going to go a long way to retaining these younger students.”

Finding a community that supports your dreams

Ricky Jordan doesn’t mince his words: SkillsUSA saved his life. Now a volunteer with the organization, Jordan, who had just moved from crime-riddled Camden, N.J. to Massachusetts to attend Bay Path Regional Vocational Technical High in 2007, was invited to the state competition when he was a freshman.

“This whole program changed my perspective, my lifestyle – everything that I wanted to do, everything that I wanted to do, everything that I thought was important,” said Jordan, who competed in extemporaneous speaking. He also earned his cosmetology license, using his haircutting skills to pay for expenses beyond a full-tuition scholarship at Johnson and Wales University to study international business. He’s currently studying at Cambridge College to get his master’s degree in school counseling.



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“SmartStart opens up that same community and builds a feeling of inclusion for freshmen as 14- or 15-year-olds, who have no idea what to expect,” he said, noting that society is still closing in-person experience gaps caused by the pandemic. “Being in that room shows them they have a community that cares for them, where you can feel safe, significant and valued for who you are.”

Jordan delivered SmartStart’s keynote address, during which he advised students to remember the acronym HALT – standing for hungry, angry, lonely, and tired – and to not make difficult decisions when feeling any of these things. “I was a father graduating out of high school and becoming a freshman in college,” said Jordan, who also served as a state and national officer. “I had my daughter midway through that year, and that was rough and tough, but SkillsUSA had taught me to become adaptable, flexible and open-minded.”

His mission was to inspire students to find their spot in SkillsUSA, whether graduates master a skill and step straight into a career or continue to college. “I want them to take what other people are giving them – from the advisors to the panelists to the older students in the individual booths – and bring that back to their schools and their communities and be the change they want to see in the world,” he added.

Getting in on the ground floor of something bigger

Brian Belluso Gonzalez, an eighth grader at LVTI, initially got involved in SkillsUSA because of his older brother. He’s focusing on the community action category.

“At the start of my year, I felt like I didn’t really have a grasp of what SkillsUSA was,” Gonzalez said. “SmartStart did a great job of filling in those holes where I didn’t fully understand SkillsUSA. I took away a lot of new information about the fundamentals of SkillsUSA, like how it focuses on the three areas of technical, workplace and personal skills.”

Manguia and his classmates centered their booth on community service, which has been an important part of the chapter’s mission. The team’s table featured a mishmash of items to be donated to a local homeless shelter. The younger students were asked to match items and place into a bag, which would then be provided to individuals in need. The booth earned first place for creativity and second place overall.

Anthony Robles, another eighth grader, is still exploring various career paths. Like his classmates, he had gotten a general program introduction, but the summit gave him a bigger picture. “It helped me understand what skills you will gain,” he said, “and how far that goes beyond just our school.”



MRE Challenge Puts Culinary Students to Taste Test

When life gives you Italian sausage and peppers and tacos, of course you can't make lemonade – but you can make some mighty tasty Italian enchiladas.

That appetizer was how a trio of culinary students from Blue Hills Regional Technical High School kicked off their run for the championship title in the annual MRE Challenge, hosted earlier this year by SkillsUSA Massachusetts in partnership with the Massachusetts Army National Guard.

Akin to FoodTV's long-running "Chopped" series – where chefs open a basket to discover mystery ingredients they must incorporate into that course – the competition challenged student chefs to reinvent Meals, Ready-to-Eat. More commonly known as MREs, these portable meals fuel soldiers in training or battlefield sites far from the mess tent. Pre-cooked MREs are designed to hold shelf-steady for three years.

These meals aren't considered haute cuisine by anyone's definition, but students needed to break down, reassemble and cook food items contained only in those meal packages into palate-pleasing appetizers, entrées, desserts and drinks. They had to cook using the package's built-in, water-activated heating element, and they could bring in two bottles of water. Two complete versions of each dish were delivered for judging on taste and presentation.

"The challenge is: You get there, you get six packages and you're not exactly sure what's going to be in those packages," said Nafisatu Apatira, a Blue Hills RTHS junior.

For many of the teams, the MRE Challenge serves as a warm-up to SkillsUSA Massachusetts' Leadership and Skills Conference, scheduled for April 25-27. Culinary is among the 111 disciplines where students will be participating in hands-on skills competitions.

Being ready for anything

At the competition, the judges gave each team a random set of MREs. Competing in their first MRE Challenge, the Blue Hills RTHS students quickly unpacked spaghetti, ravioli, tacos, apples, cheese bread, crackers and cake, not to mention an assortment of jams, spreads and peanut butter. Looking at the foodstuffs – including a lot of taco packages – on other chefs' tables around the room, they considered themselves fortunate with that baseline of ingredients.

"Your first thought is "This is what soldiers are eating?" Apatira said. "The textures in these MREs are very different from what you normally eat on a day-to-day basis. There were some very dry textures, some very moist textures – a lot of stuff that you don't usually work with."

The teams had 30 minutes before cooking begin to open their assigned MREs and a piece of paper to jot down ideas. The students thought about how to parse all the various ingredients to compile the three-course meal and beverage, then took on their assigned menu item.



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Beyond the Italian enchilada appetizer, the three young chefs rounded out the menu with a ravioli entrée and a dessert, which layered apple filling and berry cobbler between lemon-poppysseed and apple cake slices; almonds on top added crunch. Their drink was an orange fruit punch, served in a sugar-rimmed glass.

Junior Ayianna Rosa took charge of the main course, blending several different pastas. “I separated the noodles and sauce that came in each package, then I used a little bit of all the three different sauces to make a new sauce,” she said, noting that she thinned out the sauce and used salt packets to pull out more favor. “I feel like that’s one of the things we did differently, because we took parts of each MRE to make the one dish.”

Apatira, who already runs a cake business, took on the dessert, which was almost picked clean during the judging. Ian Kregar, a sophomore, handled the appetizer, where the team fused Mexican and Italian cuisines.

Practicing for the winning taste

In the weeks leading up to the competition, the students spent time online researching MRE. A school supporter also donated a box of the military meals, allowing them to get some hands-on practice – particularly with the heating element.

Their research showed that pastas, chili, peanut butter and Kool-Aid turned up most frequently, with the military keeping about two dozen different entrees in rotation. They brainstormed over how to mix and match different parts of each meal kit to transform it into something different and flavorful.

Based on those practice and review sessions, the students said they felt like they’d already prepared some of these dishes in their minds. Once time was called during the competition, each trio introduced its dishes and explained how it was developed.

“It was a good challenge. It was fair,” Apatira said. “Everyone had a good time.”