

Creating opportunities

Opportunity Center is a training facility designed to help local job seekers gain the skills needed to find employment

By **JULIE SWIDWA**
H-P Staff Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Naem Sims was born at Mercy Hospital 31 years ago.

“Thirty-one years ago I was born here, and today I graduated from here,” Sims, who earned his GED, told a crowd gathered Friday at the Opportunity Center in Benton Harbor. The program, located inside what is now the Mercy Center, marked a year of success with an open house.

“Now I’ll be taking the landscaping class. I want to open my own business,” Sims, of Benton Harbor, said.

Charles Brattain, 35, also of Benton Harbor, told the crowd that he would keep his comments brief because he had to rush off to his job at the Pump House Grille in St. Joseph. He graduated recently from the Opportunity Center’s culinary arts class.

After Opportunity Center graduates spoke, guests toured the training facility and enjoyed delicacies prepared by culinary arts students. The center offers that career track, along with construction, landscaping, hospitality, and general math and reading skills.

The Opportunity Center was established last summer by Michigan Works! of Berrien-Cass-Van Buren and the Illinois-based Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights. Since last summer, nearly 600 Benton Harbor residents have taken part in the free academic and vocational training. Rose Hunt-Redd, the center’s director, said about 63 percent of the graduates are working and another 20 percent have enrolled in college.

Denise Potter fought back tears as she told the open house crowd how, for family reasons, she was forced to drop out of school in 1975, and just got her GED through the Opportunity Center at age 51.

“They welcomed me with open arms and patience,” Potter said.

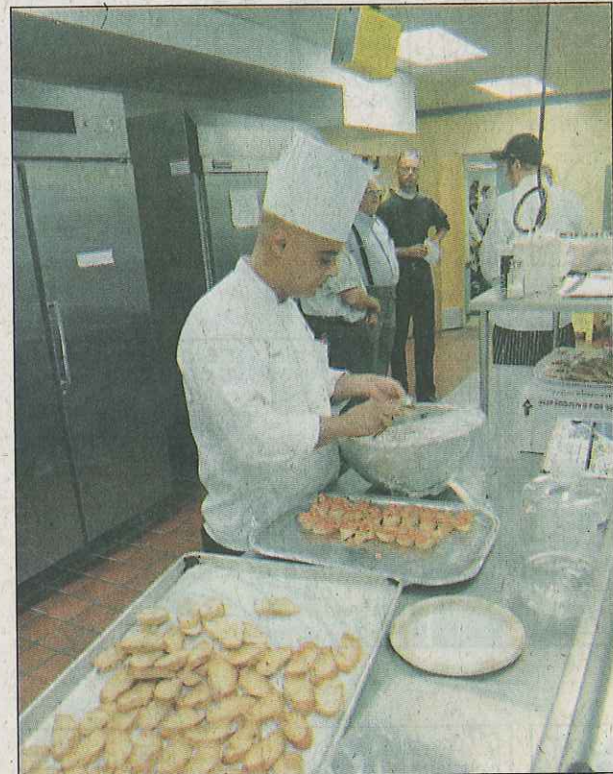
Heartland Alliance is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the human rights of people threatened by poverty or danger. Heartland provides staff and services at the Opportunity Center.

Todd Gustafson, executive director of Michigan Works!, said he and his staff had a vision two years ago of creating a place where people could go to get the skills they needed to meet the needs of area employers.

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SID MOHN

President, Heartland Alliance



Don Campbell / H-P staff

Johnathan Brown, culinary instructor and executive chef at The Opportunity Center, prepares a variety of dishes during an open house on Friday. The center, located inside the Mercy Center in Benton Harbor, was created in partnership with Heartland Alliance to help local job seekers obtain employment.

“We were introduced to Heartland, and Rose Hunt-Redd and her staff took a vision that was on paper and made it a reality,” Gustafson said. “We believe we will be here for a long time.”

Sid Mohn, president of Heartland Alliance, said he is impressed with the way Michigan Works! responds to the needs of employers, as well as the needs of people who want to work.

“This needs to be replicated across the country,” Mohn said. “Everyone has a human right to economic security, and this is a community-rooted program that affirms the value of everyone.”

Gustafson said the four vocational training tracks at the Opportunity Center were chosen based on employer needs. He said those sectors, along with health care, are the ones most in demand, with high growth and with jobs that are not filled.

For more information about the Opportunity Center, call 926-2430.

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