



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 30, 2024

CONTACT: Lauren Creiman, (909) 833-9853

Meet the Brandlers: Bonita Unified's Award-Winning ProStart Culinary Arts Teachers

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – When Bonita High School culinary arts students traveled to Baltimore to represent California at the 2024 National ProStart Invitational in April, it marked the second consecutive year that a Bonita Unified team competed in the prestigious event, following San Dimas High School's appearance in 2023, a stunning achievement for the District's ProStart culinary pathway program.

The unbelievable run by Bonita Unified culinary students is anchored by the husband-and-wife team of Nick and Laurie Brandler, who teach the ProStart program at San Dimas and Bonita high schools, respectively.

The Brandlers' success story is rooted in family. After meeting while working at a local restaurant, Nick and Laurie have found a way to combine their love for the restaurant and hospitality industries with their passion for teaching a new generation of chefs and administrators, providing them with a stable home life to raise their family without enduring the long hours of working in a kitchen.

Laurie was a student at the University of La Verne, pursuing a degree in psychology and working restaurant jobs to pay the bills. Eventually, the allure of working in a fast-paced environment led Laurie to consider restaurant work full-time, especially after meeting Nick while working at the former Harvard Square in Claremont.

Nick was determined to have a career in the restaurant industry and worked every possible job, from front-of-the-house to back-of-the-house. Nick was on the precipice of gaining his dream job as a general manager, when fate, in the form of family, intervened.

While Laurie loved working in restaurants, when it came time to raise a family, she said she realized that the long hours and inflexible scheduling of restaurant life would prove to be too hectic and began looking for alternatives.

Inspired by her father, a regional occupational program and adult education teacher, Laurie started at the District in 2006, splitting her time between Bonita and Chaparral-Vista high schools. Laurie taught Hospitality and ProStart curriculum at Bonita, going beyond traditional home economics-style lessons to offer instruction that could lead to careers in the restaurant and hospitality industries.

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In 2015, Nick was hired to teach at San Dimas and Chaparral-Vista, while at the same time working as an assistant general manager at a local restaurant. When the year was over, Nick was offered a full-time position at San Dimas High and was faced with a choice: to continue working long hours into the early morning, or take a job that provided hours more amenable to raising a family. Nick committed to San Dimas High, and the rest is history.

The Brandlers' ProStart legacy began when they partnered with the California Restaurant Foundation (CRF), which provided resources for their classroom, connected them with industry professionals, and introduced them to the ProStart Cup. They immediately had an impact – first in local and regional competitions, then in the California ProStart Cup, where they built Bonita Unified into a powerhouse.

"Nick is an amazing, creative person and I always tell the kids, ask Mr. Brandler," Laurie said. "He'll come up with the idea and then I'll figure out how we can implement it and make it work. Our end goal is to put these students where they need to be and help them in their path, whether it's culinary or beyond."

The Bonita Unified ProStart program's strength lies in the ability of Nick and Laurie to bring traditional rivals together and work as a team. Though Bonita and San Dimas students technically compete against each other in these events, they also cheer each other on and are ready to support whichever team advances to the next level.

"We don't really have any rivalries here," Nick said. "We want success for our students. When San Dimas went to nationals last year with the management team, Laurie came out to help us prepare, taking time to train my kids in public speaking. We're both very student-focused and care about changing their lives."

Over the years, the Brandlers have inspired several ProStart students to find their place in the industry, including Kris Lara, who works as a pastry chef at a San Francisco Michelin-rated restaurant, and Kiara Jimenez, a program and events coordinator with the CRF, who also traveled to Washington D.C. for the 2024 ProStart Nationals. Still, the Brandlers feel as if this is only the beginning.

"I want to see how far we can take things," Nick said. "Laurie and I want to give our students the best possible experience they can get. It takes dedication and effort. We want to continue to invest our time into our students and keep on learning."

PHOTOS:

BUSD_BRANDLERS1: Nick and Laurie Brandler prep ingredients for Nick's ProStart culinary class.

BUSD_BRANDLERS2: Nick and Laurie Brandler pump their fists in the air as they celebrate San Dimas High School's first-place finish at the California ProStart Cup in 2023.

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