



Q+A: Kelley Jones, Epicurean Charitable Foundation chairman



The Epicurean Charitable Foundation has been grooming Las Vegas' future hospitality leaders for a decade now, providing Clark County School District graduates with full-ride scholarships and mentoring opportunities with the city's top food and beverage executives.

On Friday night, the local organization celebrates its 12th annual M.E.N.U.S. (Mentoring & Educating Nevada's Upcoming Students) fundraising gala, which includes a performance by Luxor headliners the Jabbawockeez and a dine-around at the resort's pool featuring the city's premier F&B outlets.

Before the wining and dining begins, ECF Chairman of the Board Kelley Jones, also a founding partner and a co-owner in Trust3 Hospitality and LeLe Hospitality, discussed the organization's beginning, the scholarship program and how one of his mentees will soon be bartending at a restaurant he co-owns in Tivoli Village.

You are a charter member of ECF. Why did you want to become involved with the organization?

Originally, we, a bunch of food and beverage executives, got together as a camaraderie — to help each other out, to be a resource to each other. We always met in different peoples' properties each month and ate and drank really well, and probably not even five, six months in, we decided that we wanted to give back to the Las Vegas community. ... We collectively decided that we wanted to help underprivileged high school kids get into culinary and hospitality schools because most of us had started in the industry in high school.

What sets ECF apart from other scholarship organizations?

We cover everything — we offer a full-ride, four-year scholarship, including all of their materials and books. We also mentor our students ... as soon as you get the scholarship, you're paired with a board member. Our goal is to create the next industry leaders here in Las Vegas through the scholarship, mentorship and helping them with job placement.

I hear the mentor work is quite varied — proofreading papers, assisting with concepts for projects, etc. How have you helped students?

Definitely helping with project work, especially when it comes to business plans and concept decks ... Also just being that person who they can pick up the phone and call at any time with any questions — personally, scholastically and professionally.

You're a mentor to three ECF scholarship recipients. Where are your mentees right now? What are they're doing with their careers?

One of my mentees went to the Culinary Institute of America. She graduated three years ago, and now she's a manager in a restaurant at Mandalay Bay. We still see each other once a month and have lunch and kind of catch up, and she calls me for advice. It's a wonderful relationship. ... She doesn't need my mentorship now; now it's more of a friendship. The other is in her senior year in college, and it's certainly been a wonderful time as we've gotten to know each other. And the other I just started our mentor relationship just a few months ago ... she just started her freshman year.

So graduation is on the horizon for one of your mentees. Where is she headed?

Right now she's working at the Venetian at the front desk, but she wants to be in hospitality in a restaurant. And, in fact, over the next couple of months, she's going to be learning how to bartend in one of my restaurants.

I know you recently opened Hops & Harvest and Poppy Den in Tivoli Village – are there any ECF connections there?

We were in New York together for the Averro scholarship — Averro [a restaurant management software company] graciously supports and pays for one of the students, through an interview

and essay writing contest, to be picked to go to New York City with their mentor. My student won, and in New York, she was saying she wants to go to bartending school. ... I said, "Come work in my place, and I'll have my bartenders teach you how to bartend."

Is she at Hops & Harvest then?

Yeah, she'll be starting next Friday, actually.

ECF's biggest annual event, M.E.N.U.S., is this weekend. Can you tell our readers about the event?

M.E.N.U.S. is such a fun event to produce and to attend. ... Our students actually help produce the event and help set it up and help work it, so they're certainly getting great experience from an event-management standpoint.

You've been with the organization since its inception. What has been your most memorable moment from working with the organization?

Being the newly elected chairman, I decided it was probably an important thing to go through the scholarship process. So this year for the first time, I joined the scholarship committee and sat through the interview process as we went from 70 students down to picking four recipients. ... Watching how we effectively changed four people's lives was certainly impactful, and I hope to go through the process for many years to come.

Why do you think it's important for Las Vegans to support ECF?

It's our future. Our students are our future. They're the young adults who will ultimately run this town. I think it's very important to invest — from a time, mentor and monetary standpoint — in our future.

The Epicurean Charitable Foundation's fundraiser, M.E.N.U.S., begins at the Luxor at 6 p.m. The cost is \$500; go to ECFLV.org for more information.