

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Megliola: Keefe Tech grad helps on Colombian farm



By Lenny Megliola Daily News Correspondent

Sep 26, 2017 at 2:49 AM

“Cooking,” Kendra Melanson exclaimed. “I love cooking!” Perhaps that’s what she should be doing, the kitchen her destiny.

She’d give it a try.

So after her freshman year at Natick High School, Melanson enrolled at Keefe Tech in Framingham. She took up culinary arts. “I liked the small school atmosphere. The teachers knew you, and I got to know kids from different towns. Keefe was very welcoming. I loved it. No doubt.”

Melanson is a junior at Clark University now. She's drifted away, a considerable distance, from the notion that she'd someday become a noted cook or chef at a respectable restaurant.

In fact, if you wanted to see her this summer, you would've needed to book a flight to Bogota and find a certain Colombian hillside where Melanson was doing noble work, helping impoverished women make a living.

It started with a garden Melanson and three other Clark students carved out of a designated plot. Professor John Dobson, head of Clark's Innovation and Entrepreneur program, was with the students.

"They were older women who had struggled a lot financially," said Melanson. "They all came from poverty. We wanted to empower them."

Before leaving, they also advised the women how to better market their goods once the lettuce, broccoli, spinach etc. were ready for picking and selling.

The women got it.

"They were so proud of themselves," said Melanson.

The trick was to help the women sell what they sowed for a decent profit to help their families. Previously, the women sold farm goods to people on the street who couldn't pay much. The farmers continued to do business with these women, but for the first time the Clark group stretched the sellers' parameters. They had to sell where the money was.

"They went to the wealthier part of town where there was more of a demand for organic produce," said Melanson. "We helped with the manual labor and Clark helped with the funding."

The hillside women didn't crack under the weight of the project. "They just needed the resources," said Melanson.

After 10 days, and with the farm looking healthy, the project members returned to the U.S., except Melanson, who stayed for four more weeks.

“I knew some Colombians from Worcester. They went to WPI. I stayed with them and was able to travel the country. It was an interesting experience. I even went to a wedding, a relative of one of the families I was staying with.

“The thing that stuck with me was how I was able to immerse myself in the Latin-American culture.”

It helped that she had taken a couple years of Spanish in school. She couldn't have imagined any of this growing up in Natick.

“I'd just ride my bike to Dug Pond and go to the Common. I was always running around town with my friends. I had a tough childhood. Moved around a lot. Ashland. Framingham. I was kinda shy.”

In elementary school she managed to get in a couple of school plays.

“But I had no lines.” Broadway wasn't whispering in her ear.

By the time she'd gotten to middle school in Natick – she attended Kennedy and Wilson – “I had broken out of my shell.”

Choosing Clark put her in “a small school atmosphere again. It was cool. A lot more opportunities came my way.” She picked biology as a major, then changed to environmental science. At Keefe Tech her senior year, she had won an award for outstanding science student.

OK, she did have one final flirt with cooking before going to Clark.

“I looked at culinary arts schools, but I decided I wanted to be a scientist.”

Colleges are supposed to have profound effects on students. That certainly was the case with Melanson.

“My first year was kinda crazy, but a good crazy, I found a lot of things to do on campus. I joined a couple of clubs. My sophomore year I dove into my major even more. That's when I decided to apply for this project.”

She reflects on her time in the countryside of Colombia and it leaves her with a warm feeling.

“When we left, the women were in charge of the garden,” When the vegetables were ready for

gathering, the women would begin selling, making money to help their families.

Lenny Megliola can be reached at lennymegs@aol.com. Follow him on Twitter @lennymegs.

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