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The good cook

By Kevin Cullen, Globe Columnist | September 8, 2008

There were so many U-Hauls in town last week you would have thought Gustav was barreling toward Back Bay.

They're back, the students who return each year to the apartment blocks on Commonwealth Avenue and Beacon Street like so many swallows in Capistrano. And no doubt, we will soon be hearing stories about some of them doing something untoward, stories from year-round Brighton residents complaining about the things that some kids do.

But this is not one of those stories.

Meet Matt Hamilton. He is 21 years old. He grew up in Wilmington, Del., and is a senior at Boston College. For the last few years, he has spent a good chunk of his free time at a place called Haley House, a soup kitchen in the South End, and its satellite bakery and cafe, just off the Triangle in Dudley Square in Roxbury. Neither of those places will ever be confused with Maryann's, the Cleveland Circle bar that has been known to tempt a few BC students.

Hamilton is one of those liberal artsy types who didn't exactly see himself as being an entrepreneur. But a funny thing happened after his freshman year, when he started volunteering at Haley House. He was working alongside people in the bakery who were trying to overcome poverty, alcoholism, homelessness, old and not-so-old rap sheets. They were trying to overcome a lot. He talked to them and realized that he and they had grown up in different countries in the same country.

Kathe McKenna runs Haley House and sees it all the time.

"The BC kids who volunteer here, they grew up knowing they were going to college," she said, sitting in the cafe, its exposed brick walls dotted with paintings. "The people we serve, a lot of them grew up knowing they were going to jail."

Matt Hamilton started questioning everything, including whether he was just assuaging his middle-class guilt by working in a soup kitchen. Katie Jumper, a Brandeis student who was a Haley House veteran, pulled him aside one day.

"One of us is in charge of the food," she told him. "One of us is in charge of the vibe."

Hamilton laughed.

"Once Katie explained that to me, everything made sense," he said. "It's not about food. It's about dignity. It's about giving people attention. It's about giving them a chance. And I just thought about the cookies."

Matt Hamilton's idea was to sell the chocolate chip cookies that were being baked by people who never had the chances he had, to make the bakery self-sustaining, to make those who made the cookies believe there was something outside the Triangle in Dudley Square. The Rev. James Fleming, a Jesuit at BC and one of his mentors, suggested they sell them on campus. They went to Dick Keeley, associate dean at BC's business school. Keeley took the idea to his students, and they drew up a business plan. One student, John Rodier, designed the labeling and packaging. Accounting students did a cost-analysis study.

Last spring, they started selling the cookies in the BC dining halls. They sold out the first batch of 300 packages in a day. By the end of the semester, they were selling 1,800 packages a week. This semester,

the sky's the limit.

Haley House is named after Leo Haley, a BC graduate student who died of a heart attack after being attacked in the very South End neighborhood where he worked with the poor. Haley House rose from his ashes 42 years ago.

To some, the natural reaction to Leo Haley's death would be to run away and never look back. Instead, Matt Hamilton and those other kids leave the comfort of their bucolic campuses and walk into the ghetto, every day. These kids, not even out of college, have created more than a business. They've created something Katie Jumper would call a good vibe.

Matt Hamilton is majoring in theology and economics. He's already doing God's business.

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