

Change Your Perspective, Change Your Life

If you ever visit Union Kitchen, be sure to wear your running shoes. Darren Barbour will guide you at whirlwind speed through prep areas, refrigerated spaces, up and down stairs explaining the ins and outs of his duties as Kitchen Manager. His boundless energy represents incredible enthusiasm and immense gratitude for his colleagues at the food incubator; sentiments which colleagues also feel toward Darren. Around every corner, at most turns you're apt to hear "Darren is the best."



Darren started out as a janitor with Union Kitchen about three years ago. A native Washingtonian he was quite an athlete in his younger years, earning a track and basketball scholarship to New Mexico State. But he turned it down, not wanting to leave his mom who was battling cancer. It was his mom who nurtured his skills for cooking, cleaning, and sewing—things Darren says he does better than most women. But losing his biological mother and then a stepmother to the disease caused Darren to fall into a hole of self-pity and addiction, dangerous places for a person with bipolar manic depressive disorder. For many years he struggled with severe mood swings which resulted in negative behaviors and eventually a period of incarceration. It was there that he "released the burdens to a higher power" and began to turn his life around.

Darren came to the Department on Disability Services Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to get a fresh start. Paired with a vocational rehabilitation specialist he revamped his resume, attended job fairs, and participated in life skills and empowerment trainings that helped build his confidence and boost his esteem. Now 10 years free of addiction with stabilized mental and emotional behaviors, Darren pours himself into the various aspects of his role at Union Kitchen. From security guard and carpenter to food handling and sanitation compliance, Darren proudly proclaims that he is "built to serve others." He shies away from the limelight, choosing to let the cleanliness and efficiency of the facility impress visitors, members, and health inspectors. Licensed in commercial and industrial cleaning, Darren recently launched Barbour Cleaning Services. Union Kitchen Co-founder Jonas Singer helped Darren develop his business plan and a member of the incubator designed his business cards with the tagline: *No job is too hard for us*. It is this type of support that causes Darren to view the team at Union Kitchen as the "most caring and loving people" he has ever met. Five months after starting his job, Darren's niece was killed in a car accident. Singer who was on vacation from the shop came back to ensure that Darren's family had food for the repast and Kitchen members raised funds to assist with funeral expenses. "I am forever grateful," said Darren.

Faith plays a big part in Darren's life. "I've met great people through RSA, who have encouraged and supported me." A father of three young adults, he strives to remain a positive and responsible parent seeking to take his personal business to the highest level possible. His life motto is one that people with disabilities and employers can benefit from: "Change the way you look at things and the things you look at will change."