



## Be Our Guest Program Achieves Student Career Development Success At the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's Parliamentary Food Services

Toronto, April 2025 - Since February, Parliamentary Food Services (PFS), the branch responsible for all food service operations at Ontario's Legislative Building in downtown Toronto, has hosted a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) student as part of the Be Our Guest (BOG) program, a career development experience that brings TDSB secondary school students into hospitality communities to help them make decisions on their future work.



**(From left to right) Clerk of the Legislative Assembly Trevor Day, Alexis Romero and Executive Chef Mark Caskenette**

Alexis Romero, a grade 11 student from Toronto's Woburn Collegiate Institute, has been working at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's PFS branch in the Quorum Café alongside Executive Chef Mark Caskenette and the PFS team on a placement that will last through mid-June.

"There's no pressure in the job," Alexis explains. "It's a great environment – one where I can make mistakes and get help correcting them. This has been a great starter position for me and has confirmed it's the career path I want to follow."

That's exactly the type of feedback the BOG program is hoping for from its participants.

"This is experiential learning at its best, and an amazing opportunity for everyone involved – the students, our amazing program sponsors and partners as well as the teachers," confirms Chun Siu, a BOG program teacher with the TDSB who is one of its coordinators. "These real-world opportunities build confidence, career readiness, and connections that last well beyond high school. It's a great investment in our youth." Chun works closely with Vanessa Yoon, BOG co-lead. Vanessa, also a TDSB teacher, was instrumental in coordinating Alexis' successful placement with PFS.

Founded in 2017 by a group of hospitality leaders who launched the program in TDSB high schools, Be Our Guest operates through the collaboration of the school boards, hospitality organizations and the Ontario Restaurant Hotel & Motel Association (ORHMA). Since its inception, hundreds of BOG student graduates have become employed in numerous career opportunities in hospitality and developed transferrable skills to take them into varied occupations. As part of enrolment, BOG offers a dual credit opportunity through George Brown College's Centre for Hospitality & Culinary Arts, behind-the-scenes tours of partner hotels, leadership panels with hospitality professionals for career talks and bursary opportunities from the ORHMA for those pursuing post-secondary studies in hospitality. The program has recently expanded to the York Region and Simcoe Boards.

PFS branch Director Tim Lilleyman is also overseeing Alexis' work and is very enthusiastic about his branch's involvement with the BOG program.

"As a relatively new entity at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Parliamentary Food Services is striving to be the best we can at offering superior culinary services," says Tim. "Hosting a Be Our Guest student allows us to share our excellence with the next generation and let them take that back out into the wider hospitality industry as they begin their careers. When people ask Alexis where she





learned to do things so well, we know we will have been an important part of her skill-building experience. That reputation helps showcase what we're aiming for and gives us a greater connection to our community."

When talking about the program, both Tim and Chef Mark agree that they've had amazing careers in hospitality that they're thankful for.

"Having a program like BOG here is a way for us to pay forward what Mark and I – and many of other of our dedicated team members - have learned in hospitality over the years. It also connects us with the community around us," Tim continues. "Our industry was devastated by COVID and now we're rebuilding. Mentoring programs such as BOG are an important part of creating a foundation for a new generation that will carry our industry into the future as we adapt to change." Since the start of the pandemic, restaurants and other hospitality locations have had to implement new safety procedures and guidelines that are now part of standard training routines for new workers coming into the industry – aspects Alexis is learning through her hands-on work at PFS.

"There are definitely more guidelines involving food safety preparation now," she comments. "I'm thankful I've had the opportunity to incorporate those into my learning here before entering the workforce, it's a big advantage. Actively working in the kitchen and seeing what it's really like will be my biggest takeaway from this experience – it's been invaluable." Alexis looks forward to completing her work term with PFS and her credit at George Brown and then returning to school for grade 12 next year before she moves forward with career plans that might mix with her entrepreneurial side. She revealed that she's a passionate baker – so much so that she started her own cookie business called Alex Bakes Cookies. Through it she's experimented with her own cookie recipes that she shares with friends and markets through social media when time permits.

With that kind of spirit, the future looks bright indeed! Tim confirms that another Be Our Guest student will join PFS in the fall, offering a continuation of development and learning for all involved in this unique environment.

