

UMES off-campus eatery is a 'learning laboratory'

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Brandon Phillips knows boredom in a small college town, especially on weekends — too few places off campus for students to "hang out" and few options for good food.

He retreated after classes to his hometown in Salisbury and restaurants galore, leaving behind University of Maryland Eastern Shore classmates whose local choices for social offerings outside campus were limited. Phillips turned entrepreneur after graduation in 1998, taking over the landmark Atlantic Stand sandwich shop on the Boardwalk in Ocean City.

When he decided to open a second eatery on the Lower Shore, he was drawn back to Princess Anne where after almost two decades, not much in the way of social offerings had changed.

"On the weekend, local guys wanted to have a place to hang out," recalled Phillips, who earned a degree in physical education at UMES. "I wanted to open something small, and I approached the athletic director at UMES. We went from there."

Phillips intends to help fill the social void for UMES students in search of a good time off campus — on weekends and any other time. He opens the M Street Grille this spring in the Princess Anne University Village shopping center.

"I want the grille to serve as a bridge between the university and the community," he said. "I want it to be a welcome center."

As national fast-food brands carve a presence on area college campuses, the University of Maryland Eastern Shore is etching its logo onto a shingle off campus. M Street Grille opens by April in a busy retail section of Princess Anne, creating a training venue for students in hospitality, tourism and business education programs as well as jobs to help pay college tuition.

The UMES Foundation is leasing the former Get'N Grounded Coffee shop that closed several months ago in a five-year agreement with shopping center owner BRK LLC, or through fiscal year 2021. Phillips is sub-leasing the business that will be a student learning laboratory, with about five students working there at a time, said Kim Dumpson, UMES executive vice president. The business is situated off the high-traffic northbound Route 13 and near the northwest entrance to the campus and clusters of off-campus, multifamily student housing communities.

The name of the shopping center already has been changed to reflect a university presence, adding the word "University" to the Princess Anne Village Shopping Center. The center also plans an electronic billboard promoting a UMES interest as part of a separate five-year licensing agreement with BRK, Dumpson said.

The educational mission of the restaurant is reflected in its name: GRILLE is actually an acronym for "Gaining Real Impactful Life Lessons through Experience and Education," Dumpson said. The "M" mirrors the university's iconic logo, she also said.

"M Street Grille is a learning laboratory that cultivates, encourages and promotes entrepreneurialism among UMES students interested in pursuing careers in the hospitality industry," said Dumpson. "It is designed to provide a unique, hands-on environment that translates the work students learn in the classroom and allows them to apply that knowledge and skill in a real-world environment."

The UMES campus is tucked about a quarter of a mile behind Route 13, and the restaurant and billboard off the intersection of the highway and UMES Boulevard would "allow the university to have greater visibility from the

highway," Dumpson said.

M Street comes soon after the UMES campus welcomed its first national restaurant brands, Chic-Fil-A and Starbucks express in the heavily traffic Student Services Center. The university also has a relatively new presence in a downtown Princess Anne storefront known as Hawks' Corner, a gallery-style space that hosts receptions and similar events.

Most students employed at the restaurant would likely be in the Hospitality and Tourism Management program although others in business and marketing studies would be offered job opportunities, Dumpson said.

"By employing students, M Street Grille also will provide financial assistance for students in need of defraying the cost of their education," she said.

Also, the UMES Foundation, the university's fundraising arm, would direct at least half of the restaurant's net profits to support the university's Hospitality and Tourism Management and athletic programs.

The concept of a sports pub was embraced after a student competitive project in 2015 that proposed restaurant concepts before a panel of judges that included representatives in banking, hospitality and food service. The sports-themed restaurant was favored over other options that included a Mexican-themed restaurant, bar and lounge.

"As operator of M Street Grille, Phillips would work in tandem with the university's Hospitality and Tourism Management program, and use the curriculum to make the students' experience one that puts into action what is learned in the classroom," Dumpson said.

Phillips' Somerset Hospitality, LLC is overseeing the transformation of the property to a sports grille concept. He is accenting the restaurant with UMES sports history and has included a UMES welcome kiosk.

For Get'N Grounded fans, the restaurant intends to keep some menu selections, including breakfast with coffee, as well as specialty baked goods. M Street intends to add alcoholic beverages, approvals pending, Phillips said.

Dumpson sees the grille selling local farm produce.

"We will work with local farmers, to support the farm-to-table initiative," she said.