Changing a life

Sean Willard ‘14 was in the middle of a 14-hour “marathon day,” managing a restaurant in Hightstown, New Jersey, when he got a call from the admissions office at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. He was in.

“I was overcome with emotion and just started screaming,” Sean remembers. “Women from the neighboring barbershop actually came outside to see if there was a fight in the parking lot, but it was only me and my excitement.”

Sean had been working in the restaurant business for nearly six years while earning an associate’s degree in business administration from Mercer County Community College. Starting as a host at an independent steakhouse, he moved up quickly through the hierarchy and helped the operation adopt technology and convert to an automated accounting system. When the head chef, Fernando, was leaving to start his own restaurant, he invited Sean to join him and manage the front of the house.

It was at Fernando’s Grille that Sean’s passion for the hospitality industry really took off. He learned how to lead a team; he learned about the intricacies of building a successful business; and he learned how hospitality can bring a community together. When Hurricane Irene hit in 2011 and Hightstown’s downtown was six feet underwater, the restaurant—along with everything else in the 1.2-square-mile town—was forced to close. Sean and his team quickly organized a benefit dinner that drew a packed house, including city mayors and members of the State Congress, and raised funds for the relief effort.

Ready to advance his career opportunities, Sean visited Cornell with his sister. She was concerned about his ability to get in to such competitive school and encouraged him to apply elsewhere, just as a safety net.

“But I knew there was nowhere else I’d rather be,” says Sean. “I knew that if I went anywhere else, I would always wonder what it would have been like at Cornell. I figured that if I was rejected, I would just keep applying.”

With several credits transferring from MCCC, Sean didn’t have to start his bachelor’s degree from scratch, so he’s getting everything he can out of his two-and-a-half years here. He works at the Statler Hotel as a front desk agent in the Hotel Leadership Development Program. He’s also taking on special projects for the general manager, such as memorializing service standards and refining training materials. His love of service takes him off campus as well, where he works at Frontenac Point Vineyard and Estate Winery and volunteers weekly at The Loaves and Fishes of Tompkins County, a community kitchen that provides meals to those in need.

“Scholarship donors are bringing inspired people to the school. There is no possible way I could be at Cornell without the financial-aid support from donors,” Sean says. “I am gratefully indebted to them because of the opportunity to study here. Being here has changed my life forever—and that’s no overstatement at all. Thank you!”