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Whole Foods honors Lowell nonprofit that helps ‘enrich young people’s lives’

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There’s a lot going on these days at UTEC, a Lowell nonprofit that assists young people coming out of prison.

The organization, formerly known as the United Teen Equality Center, is working to implement a program that it says would guarantee a job for every young person from the Merrimack Valley who’s released from prison.

UTEC also plans to start selling peanut butter and other nut butters produced in its new commercial kitchen and is looking for a larger manufacturing space to expand its other business ventures, which include [crafting high-end cutting boards](#) from salvaged wood and recycling mattresses.



From left: Ben Rose, Whole Foods regional vice president, Chris Austin, director of food enterprises, Sadyra Martinez, transitional coach, Alex Santana, and Gregg Croteau, UTEC chief executive officer. (JETTER PHOTOGRAPHY)

“That’s going to allow us to triple the amount of jobs,” said UTEC chief executive Gregg Croteau. Currently, UTEC works with about 800 clients and employs approximately 160 of them.

Last month, UTEC was named Supplier of the Year for most of New England by grocer Whole Foods Market Inc., which carries the organization’s cutting boards in stores across the northeast. It competed for the honor with more than 2,000 suppliers.

“It’s an endorser, it’s a legitimizer, it’s an uplifter for us,” Croteau said, who added that the award came at the “perfect time” for the organization as it prepares to grow.

Several UTEC staffers went to Austin, Texas, where Whole Foods is based, to receive the award. So did 19-year-old Alex Santana, who has participated in the program for the last two years and is working on getting a GED.

“For a long time I’ve been in the woodshop, which I’ve really loved,” she said. “Being involved with UTEC is a great experience and, to be honest, it changed my life and made me a better person.”

In a statement, Ben Rose, North Atlantic regional vice president at Whole Foods, said, “UTEC’s resounding dedication to enrich young people’s lives and enhance communities made them a clear choice” for the supermarket chain’s North Atlantic Region Supplier of the Year award.

https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2019/05/17/whole-foods-honors-lowell-nonprofit-that-helps-enrich-young-people-lives/WjJoiVnFQY7Us4UGehN58L/story.html?camp=bg:brief:rss:MSN&rss_id=MSN_rss_brief