

Gene LaMaster sat before his television in 2012. Among the contestants of the show *MasterChef* was Christine Ha, a blind chef, who would go on to win the title. Gene, who has low vision, remembers, “When I saw her do it, I said, ‘I can do that.’ I already cook at home for my family. I knew this was what I wanted to do; what I needed to do. I wanted to be financially independent.”

Having worked with his mother in the kitchen since the age of five he says, “Cooking has always been something in me.” He set out to reach his goal of attending culinary school. To help achieve this goal, he contacted the Tennessee Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for assistance. Gene recalls that VR was supportive of his employment goal to become a chef. After conducting his own research on available programs, he learned about L’Ecole Culinaire. With a smaller class size he would get more attention; which was the support he knew he needed. When he approached VR about attending the school he was told, that due to cost, he would only be approved for attending the culinary program at Southwest Tennessee Community College where class sizes were much larger. For a period after this, Gene says, he and VR were suddenly in disagreement about his employment goal. VR began recommending training in sales, rather than cooking, and questioning his ability to perform the tasks performed by chefs, such as using sharp knives.

Gene, unsure if VR would agree to his desired employment goal, and determined to “stick to his guns”, contacted Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT). Through the Client Assistance Program, or CAP, Gene began working with an advocate, Tricia Griggs. Together, they were able to make their case to VR for Gene to pursue his employment goal and attend the school of his choice.

It took a year with Gene advocating on his own at first and then contacting DRT before VR agreed to support his attendance at L’Ecole Culinaire. And in May 2016, Gene finally stepped foot into the classroom as the first student with low vision. Since that date he has remained on the Dean’s List with a 3.5 GPA and states of the school community, “The students, dean, and faculty all support me. I give them motivation and they give it back to me.”

When talking to Gene, his persistence and passion for other people shine through. “This picture is bigger than me,” he says. Because he paved the way as the first student with a disability, “L’Ecole can now educate others with disabilities.” On his experience working with VR he explains, “I’m advocating to make it better for those who come behind me.” Gene would not be swayed from the employment goal that he set for himself and will see his dream come to fruition when he graduates in October. He hopes that through sharing his story, others might be inspired to stand up for what they dream of, too.