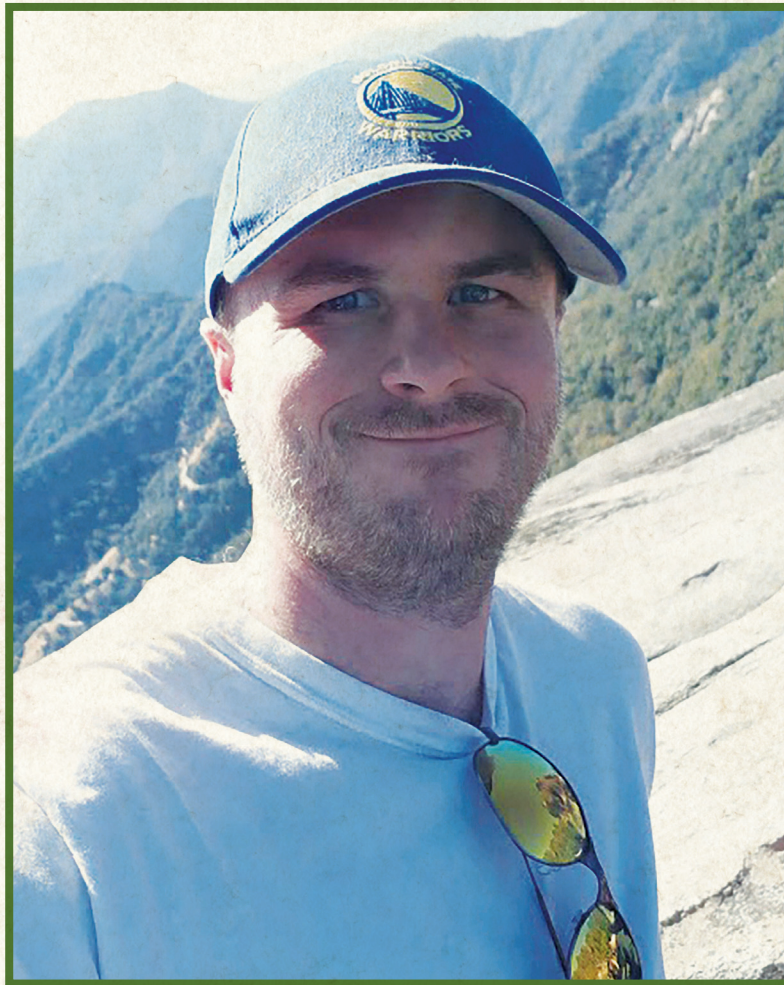


FINDING *Balance*



AND
LEADING
to Serve

BY GRACE BECKER

Between working full time, raising a family and getting his degree, Michael Weir found stability and a path to leadership.

Not many of us have the capacity to balance all facets of our lives simultaneously and we're often left choosing between passion, work, school and hobbies. Few of us are bold enough to juggle them all.

That is, unless you are Michael Weir, a full-time student at CSU Bakersfield, full-time Assistant Store Manager at Smart & Final, and recipient of the 2021 Legends of the Industry Scholarship. This \$10,000 award, funded annually by the California Grocers Association Educational Foundation, honors those going above and beyond to earn an education while simultaneously pursuing a career in the grocery industry.

If you ask him, Weir's success is largely due to a combination of stellar time management skills and a cadre of mentors who inspired him to seek more from his career.

A Bakersfield native, education was not a priority for Weir as a teenager who struggled through high school. Once graduation rolled around, he had no interest in pursuing higher education and went straight to work in retail.

Weir's first ever job was at a small independent grocery store in Bakersfield, Young's Market. At that point, he did not see a future in grocery but enjoyed the independence of having a job. Weir learned the ins and outs of grocery at Young's, assuming numerous positions in the store over eight years from bagging, to working the cash register or in the deli and even managing.

While grinding through retail, Weir met his future wife, Amy, who inspired him to reach for more.

"I started to see 20 or 30 years down the line and without a college degree it did not look promising. We knew we'd eventually want kids. Neither one of my parents have a college degree and they have certainly struggled their whole lives to make ends meet. I don't want to be in that position," he said. He made the call to pursue a degree.

A few months before Weir was set to attend CSU Bakersfield to begin his degree, Young's Market went out of business and he lost his job. Luckily, just a month later in summer of 2012, Smart & Final opened down the street from his house and Weir applied.

When he was hired to work in the receiving department at Smart & Final, he did not have a car and would wake up at 2 a.m. to budget enough time to walk or bike to his 5 a.m. shift. Weir found balance between working part-time at Smart & Final and going to school part-time, doing homework on days off. In 2014, Weir's wife Amy became pregnant and he dropped out of school to prioritize his family's future.

With another mouth to feed, he took on a second job as a custodian for a property rental company and worked up to 65 hours a week. Weir knew aiming for an education would open the door to more opportunity for him and his family.

After juggling two jobs, Weir was promoted to a full-time position at Smart & Final and was able to leave his custodial job. He spent the next year working full time to get his finances together. The Weir's second baby came along in 2016.

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Finally, after a hiatus, Weir returned to school at a local community college, Taft College. There he absorbed as much information as possible and took any online class he could. Once he graduated from Taft in 2019, Weir moved on to CSU Bakersfield as a junior and transitioned to life as a full-time student to pursue a bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in management.

On top of working full time at Smart & Final, Weir was taking 12–15 units a semester at school. He has continued this schedule for the past three semesters and has 10 more classes to go until he completes his degree.

“When school is in session, I’m booked seven days a week. There’s no wiggle room,” he said.

“It’s about learning as much as you can and trying to recognize sales trends, seek information and try to educate yourself as best as you possibly can. Smart & Final really encourages that.”

In his day-to-day life as an assistant manager, Weir maintains merchandising standards, handles crises and researches the latest information that will affect his store.

Smart & Final fosters an environment of growth, asking questions and challenging employees to educate themselves.

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Weir’s mentors include Steve Schiltz and Jim Wood, his store manager and district manager.

“Once I started working for Schiltz and Wood regularly as a member of store management, I started to think more about a career instead of just trying to make money.”

Both Schiltz and Wood follow the “servant leadership” philosophy, aiming to make employees’ lives easier both for their benefit

and the benefit of the work environment. In Weir’s program at CSU Bakersfield, a speaker visited to discuss servant leadership, which made it all click.

“I finally had a name for what I was witnessing at work,” he said. “It’s about catering to employees’ needs to get the best out of them.”

With two young kids and school to juggle, Weir’s top priority is work-life balance, something both Schiltz and Wood have always accommodated and encouraged.

“If you are miserable in your personal life, you are going to bring it to work.”

Schiltz and Wood’s approachability makes associates feel comfortable to come to them with questions. Their leadership style has inspired Weir’s.

“Until I met them, I didn’t really have a leadership style,” he said

What began as a way to make money for his family grew into a career after meeting Schiltz and Wood. Weir developed an interest in leadership studies, a topic he’s continued to study in school. Outside of work, his wife Amy has provided continuous support, allowing him to focus on his education during off hours.

Weir is candid as he describes what it takes to be a full-time student and full-time assistant manager at Smart & Final.

“I remember when Jacquie Slobom (CGAEF Chair) called me and asked how I manage to work full time and go to school and have a family in the middle of a pandemic, and I started laughing because I don’t think ‘manage’ is the right word,” he said. “It’s not an easy way to do it, but I want a great breadth of opportunities.”

His secret? Good old-fashioned time management and a lot of caffeine.

“If you don’t have time management skills you will drown, which I learned the hard way,” he said.

His success is a product of deliberate planning.

At the beginning of each semester, Weir studies his class syllabus and plans months in advance. At the start of each week, he creates a schedule to stay on top of assignments. He leaves two to three hours a week for personal time to enjoy one of his many hobbies, whether it be chess, ice hockey, video games or cooking. Weir and Amy budget time to take the kids to hike, fish, and take road trips.

“You have to make time for yourself and your family or you’ll go looney,” he said.

The Legends of the Industry Scholarship takes a load off Weir’s mind.

“Now that I’m a senior I can see the finish line and it means I’m almost there. It’s one less thing on my plate and it’s very much appreciated.”

What Weir wants most out of his career is opportunity. Eventually, he may move up the corporate ladder within grocery, or if he’s dreaming big, open a bar with a friend. His degree will allow him options and flexibility that he may not have had otherwise.

At the height of the pandemic, Weir worked 72-hour weeks and put all of his overtime pay into savings. Due to the many challenges the industry has faced during the pandemic from supply shortages to evolving masking regulations, life in grocery has changed a lot. Now, he takes his cue from corporate leadership and moves forward one day at a time.

“You spend so much time running from one assignment to another or dealing with the kids or going to school or work and sometimes you think no one even notices what you’re going through. It’s nice to know that somebody noticed.” ■