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We Take Care Of Our Own How some extraordinary local people are paying it forward

-Heidi Groover



Nicole Eggers was running late.

The 30-year-old had recently left her job as a bartender and was speeding to a job interview with Commellini Estates, a special-event company that caters weddings and banquets. She was praying her red convertible would get her there OK.

Lately, so many things had been going wrong for her: Her marriage was crumbling and putting her kids in the car for daycare often meant letting them get rained on — the convertible's top wouldn't go up anymore. The car wouldn't go in reverse either.

When she arrived at the interview, she whipped into a parking spot without thinking. She'd have to back out, but she couldn't. After the interview, the well-dressed employees helped her push her car out of the spot so she could leave. She was humiliated.

A few days later, she got a call from Big Table. They'd heard about what had happened.

"We want to give you a car," they said.

A few weeks later, she was driving a donated 1989 Toyota Camry.

"Everything was starting to unravel and the idea that there's someone out there that cares, that's never met me, but just genuinely wants to be helpful. That was a game changer," she says. "It changed my perspective on what faces me. It gave me a new sense of hope to know there are people out there like that. We live in a good world."

That's what Big Table aims to do: Help people in the restaurant industry with their day-to-day struggles, hoping to help with something bigger along the way.

The group hosts 46-person dinners — yes, all at one big table — about every eight weeks. The guests are those who usually serve, cook or wash dishes, and the servers are those who usually dine — doctors, lawyers, businesspeople. Silverware and wine glasses clank, and diners enjoy meals prepared by some of the city's best chefs.

Then, five courses in, with just dessert left, founder Kevin Finch stands before the crowd. "Who do you know that's hurting?" he asks the group, and they leave their answers on notecards when they leave. They get

requests for everything from new shoes to tax help. Sometimes they can meet the whole need; sometimes they can only start to help. Big Table volunteers have surprised people with laptops, clothing and baby supplies and offered help with energy bills, moving and landscaping.

Finch, a foodie and part-time restaurant reviewer, started the organization in 2009 by walking away from his job as a pastor.

In his exploration of local restaurants, he'd talk with foodies and chefs, sharing their passion for some new dish or dinner spot. Then he'd hear about the industry's darker side. The hours are long and late, and most often when other people are enjoying dinner out or a holiday with their family, they're working. The side effects, he learned, were often divorce, alcoholism or drug abuse.

Almost 13 million Americans are restaurant employees, making it one of the largest industries in the country, according to the National Restaurant Association. And it's an industry with some of the highest rates of substance abuse, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"I said, 'I just stumbled onto the toughest industry in the country.' And the weird part was it didn't seem like anyone else noticed," Finch says. "Once I saw it, I couldn't walk away."

But if he told food friends he was a pastor, the conversation would almost always end soon after. They seemed afraid he would try to convert them. So, he quit to see if he could "serve these people without any strings attached."

His group is a determined, but realistic one. They know they've got to be resourceful. They put together care packages with the help of donated goods or connections from people they know, and then deliver them as a surprise.

Sometimes, receiving a one-time gift is someone's only involvement with Big Table. Other times, friendships will grow out of that gift. At its core, Big Table depends on the idea that if people help people — absent of any agenda or formal commitment — healthy relationships will flow naturally and people who need help will get it.

It's working, Finch says, faster than he can keep up with. There's a long waiting list to get into the dinners. The organization has a constant stream of care requests underway. People in cities like Seattle and Boise have asked him when he'll come to them.

But he's hesitant. Before it grows, he wants to know there are people as invested as he is — people who literally *dream* about it, like he did just the other night. (In the dream, he walked away mid-conversation with a car salesman to go talk to someone he overheard talking about Big Table. These types of things actually happen in Finch's day-to-day, he says.)

"If we need to expand, we need to expand people first," he says. "The need is always going to exceed the capacity to meet that need, so then you're saying how do we effectively engage folks and get them involved? Part of the fun of what we do is it's so basic — it's meals and it's caring for folks — that anyone can get involved."

To get involved with Big Table, visit big-table.com or call 999-7429.