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CHARITABLE GIVING

Helping Our Own

A veteran food critic is reaching out to restaurant workers through something they all appreciate—a good meal.

By Jan Fletcher

A Pacific Northwest food critic says his efforts to treat food-industry workers to a free five-course gourmet dinner fosters relationships with the workers “who have fallen through cracks” and provides them with a community that can help them in times of need.

Kevin Finch of Spokane, Washington, is founder and director of Big Table, a nonprofit founded in 2008 to build relationships with restaurant workers. Every other month, Big Table invites area restaurant workers—from all segments—to gather at an impressive six-section table that seats 48 people.

Volunteers, also from the foodservice industry, help prepare and serve the meal and reach out to dinner guests after the dinner wraps to find out if they need anything, like financial assistance or personal advice.

“Tonight is about creating community around food,” Finch told the nearly two dozen volunteers serving the January meal. “The back end is about finding ways to care for people who might be in trouble.”

As volunteers prepared to serve seared Chilean sea bass with green curry sauce, Finch told the crew, “I’ve been a food critic for 10 years, and I noticed how tough of an industry it is, with a high rate of alcoholism and substance abuse. I saw the levels of stress people were under, and I wondered who was taking care of them.”

Guests at each dinner suggest others in the industry “that we might surprise with some help,” says Finch, who found that even though the industry offers employee assistance programs, workers still often fall on hard times that go unaided.

“The dream is to create relationships, and through those relationships, connect with those who need

help,” he says. Big Table has provided insurance coverage for a worker in between jobs, childcare for a quick-serve employee, and a gift card for a newly arrived immigrant working as a dishwasher. Finch’s eventual goal is to have similar efforts pop up across the country.

Matt Jensen, a Big Table volunteer and director of marketing for the Davenport Hotel in Spokane, said that among his hotel’s 550 employees, there are sev-

eral who need help.

Harry Crase, a guest at the January dinner who works at the nearby Fleur de Sel in Post Falls, Idaho, says he’s waited tables for 22 years, and his mother waited tables for more than 50 years. “I brought my mom and she was just beside herself on how good the food was at Big Table,” Crase said. “I was overcome with the sense of camaraderie and appreciation.”



Volunteers at Big Table serve five-course meals to industry employees for free in an effort to build relationships with area restaurant workers.

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