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## LIFESTYLE IN PERSON

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Sunday, October 7, 2012

### **Kevin Finch: *At The Head Of Big Table***

Here's what everyone sees when they attend a Big Table event:

Amazing coursed dinners cooked by local chefs that are offered at no cost to those in the restaurant and hospitality community (everyone from a dishwasher or maid to owners, chefs, and managers). The moveable Big Table seats 46. Big Table has also had dinners in gardens, barns, restaurants, and other spaces in the Inland Northwest large enough to accommodate the table.

Here's what a few see:

Practical care where we help meet both immediate and long-term needs for those in the industry in crisis. Our care model is referral based and this allows us to focus on care rather than verifying the stories of people who come to us directly asking for assistance. Those in the industry tell us about real needs they see and then help us look for creative ways to surprise the person or family in need.

And finally, here's what Kevin Finch, Big Table founder and Spokane resident, says:

"I talk about growing Big Table beyond the Inland Northwest, but the other critical piece of Big Table is our vision and passion to not just start community around the meals, meet needs through our care projects, but go deeper to invest long-term in the lives of those we touch. Call this intentional friendship, mentoring, or coaching - the goal is to be present and supportive over time. In my life, what has truly impacted me has not been programs, but rather people who took time to walk alongside me. This is where we think lives truly are "transformed."

***How does Big Table work?***



Kevin Finch is the founder of the Big Table, a non-profit aimed at providing support to hospitality workers in need.

Big Table exists to transform the lives of those working in the restaurant and hospitality industry by building community around shared meals and caring personally for those in the industry in crisis, transition, or falling through the cracks. This community and care are open to all in the industry without condition.

***What led you to start it? Any specific incident?***

In 2006 a clear sense of call developed for me as I began to notice (as a restaurant critic) the isolation, the size, and the massive amount of need present in the restaurant and hospitality industry. What shook me most is that no one else was doing anything and this one industry, more than any other, is the catch basin for the most vulnerable in our country: Single parents fighting to keep life together, at-risk teens, minorities and recent immigrants, ex-felons unable to pass a background check anywhere else, etc.

For those in the industry, this was just the way life was ... tough ... and everyone they knew had the same struggles. For those outside the industry, the stunning need was invisible behind the smiles of waiters and desk clerks (who would lose their job if they didn't smile). In 2009 when we launched Big Table, there were over 1.5 million nonprofits registered in the U.S. and not one focused on caring holistically for the millions living on the edge in the largest industry in the country. Thousands of these nonprofits are organized to care for dogs, cats, and other animals.

Not one to care for the people in this huge industry that posts the highest rates of drug and alcohol abuse, massive divorce and broken relationship statistics, chronic high-levels of stress, and an almost non-existent safety net.

***Why have these planning meetings around meals? How is the meal important?***

People understand meals and community forms naturally around a table. For those in the restaurant and hospitality world, they typically are serving others. The Big Table dinners allow us to 'turn the tables' and serve them.

***Are you achieving your goals? Any examples of that?***

Absolutely. The community that forms around the table is remarkable and this leads directly into the care that we can offer to those in crisis. The Big Table Story video tells several stories of people impacted by the dinners and the care.

***What's your experience in the restaurant field?***

Prep cook in a pizza and sandwich shop. Multiple years on a high-end banquet team for an Oregon wine festival.

## SNAPSHOT

### KEVIN FINCH

**Date of birth:** November 23, 1966

**Education:** Bachelor's in English (Seattle Pacific University), M.Div (Princeton Theological Seminary).

**Family:** Wife Karen is a professor at Whitworth University. Three kids (daughter in college, twin boys in high school).

**Number of hours on average you work in a week?** Groan. 60 – plus.

**Number of hours on average you sleep in a night?** 4-7 The nights with 4 are getting more costly.

**Hobbies:** Cartooning. Cooking. Hiking and trail running. Graphic design.

**Favorite movie:** Princess Bride.

**Favorite book:** Pride and Prejudice.

**Favorite author:** Annie Dillard.

**Favorite spectator sport:** College football.

**Favorite type of music:** Upbeat indie.

**Best advice you ever received:** From my dad: "Drive in the headlights."

**Quality you admire most in a person:** Grounded creativity.

**Person who most influenced your life:** Not just one... my parents, grandmother, my uncle, my wife, and now my kids.

**Any one thing you consider your greatest accomplishment:** Taking the leap to launch Big Table.

***I understand you were a pastor? How does your background influence Big Table?***

I was, still am, technically. But the title freaked people out. When folks in the industry got wind of that it shut down conversations. We'd be having great conversations about food and restaurants, but once they found out I was a pastor, the table would clear in 30 seconds. So when the idea for Big Table came together I quit. My heart to care for people and help people wrestle with faith has not changed, but I decided if the title got in the way I'd lose the title.

As far as influence goes, I probably wouldn't have seen the need for Big Table with my background as a pastor. Not too many restaurant critics are also pastors.

***Have you gotten to know folks through this program and how many have you been able to help?***

Literally hundreds of new relationships have formed because of Big Table. In three and a half years we've tackled and completed over 100 specific care projects for individuals or entire families that have come from referrals of those in the industry and many of these have developed into on-going relationships and support.

***The website mentions the hospitality industry is a difficult one. Will it always be that way? Any changes that would improve it?***

To some extent, I think the industry will always be hard. But we could make changes by creating more of a safety net available to those at all levels in the industry. I was talking with one of our advisory board members just yesterday about whether Big Table could find a way to do this that would stay in place as people move from job to job.

***Can you talk about your background, briefly, and influences?***

Grew up in small town Montana. Came from a family packed with pastors and joined the family business. English major in college. Always loved food. Started collecting restaurant reviews during graduate school back east. Influenced most by my family including my uncle Eugene who is a pastor and writer. Another pastor/writer with a big impact has been Frederick Buechner. Food writing? Jonathan Gold, Nancy Leson, Bart Ripp.

***How can folks in the community make a difference?***

Treat servers like people. Tip 20 percent or more. Give out Unexpected 20s. Contact me for a list of "How To Care While Eating and Sleeping."

***How about your future goals/dreams with Big Table?***

We'd love to carefully grow Big Table to the point that there was a Big Table in every major food city in the country. The industry is incredibly mobile. We need to be where they are.

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