

LOCAL CUISINE

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Setting the BIG TABLE

by Cara Strickland

photos courtesy of Big Table

BIG TABLE was just beginning to get name recognition in the community when I met Kevin Finch at an event four years ago. At that time, he was the food editor for this magazine, and through that role he had come to know and care about those working in the restaurant and hospitality sectors.

Finch's research uncovered some startling facts:

The restaurant and hospitality industry has the highest rate of drug and alcohol abuse of any in the nation. Those working these fields are two to three times more likely to experience a broken relationship. These people deal with isolation, stemming from the fact that they work when most people are at rest or play, and experience constant stress in their work environments. For most people working in these professions, there is no safety net to account for unexpected illness, life events or unforeseen financial obligations. In spite of the fact that those working in restaurants and hotels are the largest single employment group in the nation (not quite double the size of any other employment group), there was not a single nonprofit dedicated to this group of people - until Finch founded Big Table in 2009.

Back then, he was the founder and sole operator, channeling his care for people into the dream of a dinner cooked by the best local chefs and attended by people who were always doing the serving. He wanted it to be the other way around for once, treating them to an evening of excellent food and great service they received, rather than provided. The first Big Table dinner was in November of 2009, beginning a tradition of restaurant and hospitality workers, from dishwashers, front desk clerks, servers, chefs and owners, all sitting together at one big table (which comes apart for storage and seats

48). Throughout the evening, relationships are initiated and cultivated and by the end of the night, people are writing down the names of people they work with who are in difficult or vulnerable situations and could use some care. That's where the real fun begins.

Since its inception, Big Table has added six more employees to the team, including two full-time employees in the new Seattle branch, which officially started in the summer of 2015, after two years of building community and connections among the key players in the Seattle scene. "Typically things start in Seattle and expand to Spokane" says Finch. "Big Table started in Spokane and has now expanded to Seattle. The size of the Seattle market is five times that of Spokane, but already we've got our two folks over there who are going into places and people are saying 'I

know about Big Table.' It's amazing." (Even though Big Table is now in Seattle, all money raised in Spokane stays here to care for local workers).

The growth of Big Table is certainly not limited to Seattle, however. Big Table is helping more people than ever in the greater Spokane area. They host dinners quarterly and spend the rest of the time responding to needs of those in the industry. "The structure is a referral model," says Finch. "I think that's unique and it's really effective, it ends up being a screening system without a screening system." On a practical level, this might mean that a chef will call Big Table because one of the servers in their restaurant is going through health challenges, or that someone who had received care from Big Table in the past will pass along a tip about another person in a tough spot.

That word of mouth network of care and connection has obviously caught on. "When we started Big Table, people would recognize my name but not recognize Big Table, they'd be like 'oh you're the food writer guy,' Finch laughs. "Now people don't recognize my name but I say I work for Big Table and their response is: "You helped my cousin," "You helped a friend," "You know what? There's this buddy at work that could use some help."

I met with the Big Table team for a behind the scenes view of what goes on in the lives of people they care for, and the stories started pouring out.

Laura Lympus, one of Big Table's Spokane Care Engagement Coordinators, shared a story about a woman named Jenna, a mother of three, married to a man dealing with health challenges who was working in fast food while struggling with a pain killer addiction. Big Table was originally connected with Jenna through a doctor with Providence's Consistent Care program (a program which looks at people who are using the emergency room as their primary care physician and connects with those people to see what's going on in their lives holistically.) "The very first time I met her I was really drawn to her. She was an amazing gal. And you could just tell that she was facing a lot of really tough stuff in her life," says Lympus.

Laura walked with Jenna as she worked her program and

went through the steps to get her driver's license back. "She was always just so encouraged. She'd always want me to celebrate with her, and she'd be so excited when I'd tell her I was proud of her." After Jenna got her license back, Lympus connected her with a manager of a local fast food franchise with a relationship to Big Table, hoping that she might get out of the work environment she was in, which had been very negative. Now, Jenna works for that franchise and calls it her dream job.

Finch shares a story of a young dishwasher named Jeremy. "We started caring for Jeremy five years ago. I helped him when

he was in prison, helped him get a job, walked alongside him just in terms of making good decisions. When he was fired from his job it was fascinating that the owners of the restaurant called us to say 'Hey, would you be there to support Jeremy? He can't work here any longer, we know you care for him.'" Big Table helped Jeremy relocate to Seattle and now the Big Table team there is able to offer him care.

While it's exciting to celebrate things like new jobs, paid bills and healing from physical ailments, Big Table isn't always about those kinds of results.

"Big Table does efficiency very well but it's a different kind of efficiency because it's people-based," says Finch. "Jeremy will probably be a dishwasher for the rest of his life. We've spent probably hundreds of hours caring for this kid at this point. But I think the model is that if one person's life is deeply transformed, then they're going to start changing others and it feels like the way our

impact is going to be felt is through the ripple effect. It's not that we helped this huge

number of people directly but that we helped this person and then this person, maybe five years later, maybe ten years later is now helping these four people and then those four people go out and help other people. The temptation is to just tell the really great success stories. These are folks that are just in very deep agony and are broken. But it seems like even the simplest thing ends up being a gift," says Finch.

"These are folks that no one cares for without strings attached, so when you do the simplest thing and they're grateful."

The partnerships Big Table has formed in the community

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allow donor contributions to go further than they otherwise would. The idea is to have a network that functions like the one most people have, so that your phone call is answered by someone who already knows you. In addition to traditional giving (a monthly gift of any amount helps take the pressure off the staff so that they can focus on the heart of Big Table: care), Big Table has some ideas for creative gifts to those in the industry. On their website, you can request “Unexpected 20” envelopes to leave in addition to a tip at dinner, or in your hotel room for your housekeeper, to make their day. You can download a list of ways to care (both monetary and otherwise) while eating and sleeping or become part of the network of care by offering up your relevant skills. You might also decide to participate in the Holiday Blitz which surprises fast food workers with Unexpected 20s for the whole crew on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and for the first time, this holiday season, you can buy a wine, chocolate and coffee gift packages, and have a portion go toward supporting Big Table (check their website for more details).

Once a year, in September, Big Table throws a party (2016 will be at the Davenport Grand on September 26). The theme is “Big Table Eats Around the World” and features cuisine from three different countries made by local chefs (next year will highlight Ireland, Jamaica and South Korea). If you’re anything like me, you’ll want to mark your calendar now.

Chris Dietz shared his favorite part of working for the nonprofit to nods of agreement from the rest of the team. “It’s just a gift to be able to call somebody and say, ‘Hey, I hear this is going on in your life, but let’s actually do something about it.’” **S**

