



THE EASTERNER

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BIG ENOUGH FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

EWU student works at a unique Spokane based non-profit

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“The service industry gives you just enough to keep a roof over your head at times if you’re lucky, but never enough to build up and never enough to move on,” said barista Kordelle Roberts.

Bartender Tricia Dunlap said, “I’ve seen so many sad circumstances of drug and alcohol abuse, and people living from tip to tip and paycheck to paycheck and just not going anywhere.”

Chef Zachary Pacleb adds that “this industry is extremely demanding, both emotionally and physically and mentally.”

Those are the sentiments of several people who work in the food service and hospitality industries. They shared their feelings in a YouTube video produced by Big Table, a Spokane based nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of people working in the industry.

Big Table’s mission derives from its view that the industry is a “catch basin” for many of its members who face situations such as being single parents, new immigrants or ex-felons.

Chris Deitz is an EWU student and currently works for Big Table as a care engagement coordinator, catering to the many challenges service industry workers face. Prior to joining Big Table three years ago, Deitz, who’s 30 and a sophomore communications major, cooked professionally for 10 years and received a first-hand account of what the industry is like.

“I learned the good, the bad and the ugly of the business,” said Deitz.

Founder Kevin Finch established Big Table in 2009 to address not only the “ugly side of the business,” but to also fill a void that other nonprofits weren’t. At the time of Big Table’s founding, no other nonprofit in the United States dedicated its mission specifically to serving the unmet needs of restaurant and hospitality workers.

While he was working as a cook, Deitz had the opportunity to attend several Big Table meetings and has known its founder Kevin Finch for over 12 years. In 2014, when he

and his wife moved from Portland to Spokane, he felt the itch to get further involved.

“I felt called to reach out to Kevin and see if there was a position open,” said Deitz. “Big Table was in the process of writing a new position and thankfully it all lined up.”

There is no shortage of people for Deitz to help at Big Table. In a 2015 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis, food preparers, waiters and waitress, and hospitality workers combined to make up the largest group of employed people in the nation, more than any other industry.

According to the National Restaurant Association, 25 percent of U.S. adults have worked in a restaurant as their first job while nearly 50 percent have done so at least once. But it’s another statistic Big Table is most concerned about.



EWU student Christopher Deitz

“In this industry [there are] some of the highest drug and alcohol abuse problems and some of the highest divorce rates,” Deitz said.

A 2009 report by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health found that food service workers drink more than double the national average of Americans, 15.2 percent versus 8.8 percent.

Big Table’s name originates from its founding premise that they would hold several shared meal events per year at a literal big table for anyone in the restaurant and hospitality industry, ranging from dishwashers to owners.

The big table dinners, which seat 48, are held at various restaurants throughout the year in Spokane and Seattle, with the goal of fostering relationships and learning the needs of those who attend. During the dinners, those in attendance also discuss and share information about the most vulnerable and needy people they know, allowing the night to have greater relationship building influence beyond the big table.

People get connected to Big Table through a referral-based process. If restaurant or hotel employees are struggling, it’s incumbent on someone else to refer them to the nonprofit.

“The biggest thing we want to be about is [building] relationships,” said Deitz. “When someone calls on your behalf and says, ‘I know this dishwasher, I know this housekeeper, I know this line cook and I know them well enough to know this need exists,’ that already starts the ball rolling on that relationship side of things.”

Not only do referrals help Big Table establish relationships, they also prevent people from directly approaching the nonprofit and potentially taking advantage of their system. Establishing rapport in the service industry is also how Big Table spreads awareness to owners and managers about who they are and what they do.

Meeting the unmet needs of hospitality workers is a daily, individualistic task that can range from helping to pay someone’s bills, to providing childcare assistance. Big Table has even given a car to a struggling single mother of three children who was also balancing going to work and attending school. The nonprofit also helps people battling drug or alcohol addiction who may not have the means necessary to sign up for insurance or any other type of aid.

Big Table connects their relationship focused approach to fulfilling unmet needs in a way that they hope provides tools to employees so that they don’t continually need to come back for more help. Once Big Table establishes

relationships, those relationships are meant to stick. They have helped people get sober and stay sober, even those in, or just released from, prison.

“One thing we have found, especially in recent years, is Big Table has been a safety net between those on the edge of the margin and then those who start to qualify heavily for some sort of state assistance,” said Deitz. “All too often there is that dollar amount within a social service that says, ‘yes or no,’ but if you’re \$10 over that there’s no sort of assistance like that so in some ways we get to bridge that gap.”

While Deitz admits that working at Big Table provides its own set of challenges, particularly that the needs simply outweigh what they can provide, he says the work he does is very rewarding.

“We get to be the ones that essentially cold call folks and say and say, ‘hey, I hear this situation is going on in your life and we as an organization would actually like to support you and do something about that,’” said Deitz. “From that perspective to be able to cold call somebody like that and say, ‘I hear you have this need and let’s not just talk about it [but] lets try to do something about that;’ it’s just the reaction that often comes is quite beautiful.”

When asked how people could start supporting Big Table if they believe in its mission, Deitz’s response didn’t even involve giving money.

“The first [step] would be, when you’re in restaurants or hotels, [to] start acknowledging those employees as much as possible as human beings rather [than] a servant or a servant to you,” said Deitz. “Getting involved in the world with Big Table is starting to show love and compassion to these folks.”

Big Table can be reached at www.big-table.com or information@big-table.com.

