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STONE SOUP PDX CONNECTS THOSE AT RISK FOR HOMELESSNESS TO RESTAURANT JOBS

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Two incongruous trends for which Portland has become famous are a vibrant restaurant scene and a crisis of homelessness.

A new nonprofit is positioning itself as a bridge between a booming food scene hungry for hard-working employees and the city's population of people living on the brink of homelessness.

"Food service tends to be one of those areas where you can come in with a little bit of history, you don't have to have a four-year degree or a graduate degree," said Craig Gerard. "You can come in with the skills that you have and as long as you can do the job and show up on time ... it tends to be a place where people can thrive."

Gerard and his wife, Ronit Gerard, are the co-founders of Stone Soup PDX, a nonprofit launched last year that combines two notoriously tricky endeavors: running a nonprofit and operating a restaurant.

Craig Gerard spoke with the Business Journal in the bustling dining area of Stone Soup's Old Town cafe, which operates as any other restaurant with a menu and a kitchen staff and the standards of service expected of a for-profit business. But it is also a space where its clients get training in culinary skills as well as life skills like budgeting, conflict resolution and communication.

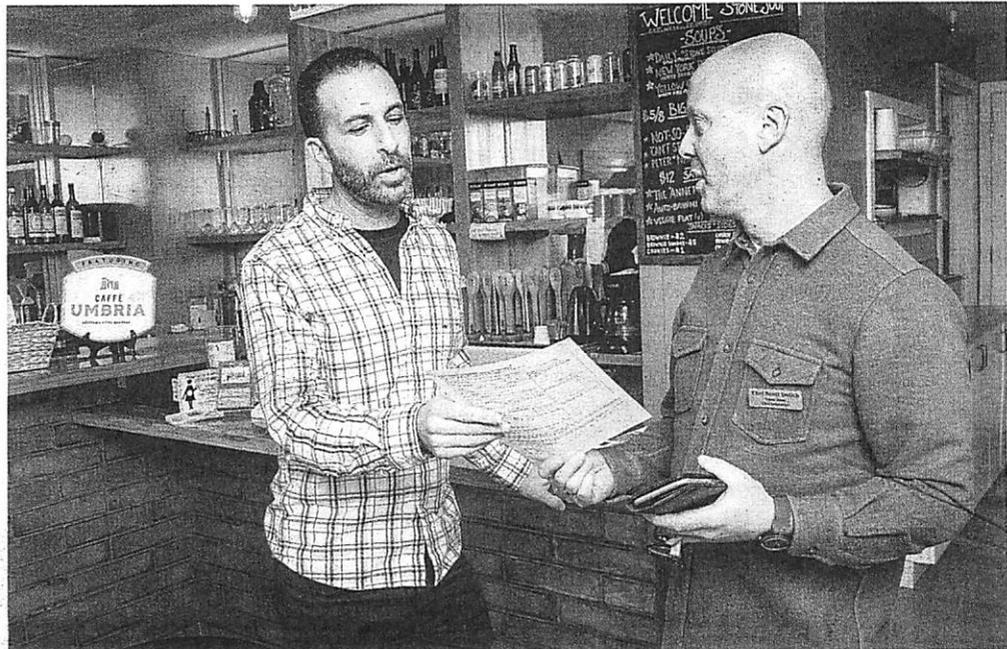
"We are taking that willing workforce and training them for a career where we know there are open jobs so that we can give people a little bit of safe self-sustainability and the tools to dig themselves out of poverty," Gerard said.

Gerard describes their mission as a "get a job school" rather than a culinary school, but their clients train in a functioning restaurant under the supervision of James Beard Award-nominated chef Scott Dolich. The 12-week program helps clients navigate kitchen techniques and standards and customer service, along with providing life skills, a restaurant externship and job-placement assistance.

"When we started meeting and talking to staff and restaurant owners as part of this, we were hearing, 'We don't need somebody who can do fine dice. We don't need somebody who has spent two years working on sauces. We just need somebody who's going to show up on time and be able to say, Yes, chef.'"

International inspiration

The Gerards' approach to fighting homelessness in Portland had its origin on the far side of the world. A background in international aid work placed them in assignments in developing countries, including Cambodia, where they found an inspiration for Stone Soup's model.



ALAN BORRUD

Craig Gerard talks with Scott Dolich, Stone Soup's chef instructor. The nonprofit trains Portland residents at risk of homelessness for restaurant jobs while also operating a working restaurant.

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STONE SOUP

What: A nonprofit program that trains people experiencing housing insecurity for jobs in the restaurant industry

Where: Old Town, in Portland

Founders: Craig and Ronit Gerard

"There's a restaurant there called Friends International, and they take street kids from Phnom Penh and train them for jobs and restaurant," Craig said. "And we were interested in how that would look in Portland because we knew the homelessness issues, that the problem here has been both visible and heartbreaking."

They wrote a business plan during a posting in Senegal, and when they were back in the States, further research led them to FareStart in Seattle, which offers a similar combination of job skills and life skills in a restaurant framework.

"When we went to go meet FareStart the first time we went up to Seattle and they said, 'Where have you been? We've been looking for somebody to do this in Portland for the last few years,'" Gerard said.

For them, the idea seemed like a natural fit for Portland with its willing workforce and its focus on addressing homelessness.

"You think about all of the momentum around homelessness that's happening right now at the city and the county and the metro level. People see this as a crisis that they want to solve," Gerard said. "It is heartbreaking to walk past somebody who's sleeping in the street when there's so much wealth around."

Culinary collaboration

The Gerards have gained some high-profile culinary support since launching. Its roster of restaurant partners include Tusk, Kachka, Life of Pie and Toro Bravo as well as grocery chain New Seasons.

"The generosity of the restaurant community has been great," Craig Gerard said.

Stone Soup recently announced a series of public dinners in collaboration with John and Renee Gorham of the Toro Bravo Inc. Restaurant Group, starting Feb. 26. The Gorhams' support of Stone Soup's work has also included the hiring of one its first culinary graduates at their restaurant Bless Your Heart Burgers.

"He has just been an incredible addition to our team," said Renee Gorham of Shaun Hayes, the Stone Soup alum.

Gorham said she was impressed with Stone Soup's mission and its work with clients since the organization launched.

"Right away, we thought this is an incredible thing for a lot of reasons," she said. "They've done a great job with their students to set them up for success."

The partners in the restaurant industry, where training and retaining workers require time and money, benefit from workers who worked harder to find stable jobs and have more reasons to stay where they are hired.

"Labor is, a huge, huge expense, and when you've got to constantly be training employees it takes time and resources away from other things," Gerard said. "So we're hoping that we can be a service to the industry in that area."

The organization has started small, graduating its first two participants in November. Currently they are working with five clients but their goal is to bring 40 to 45 people through the program this year and focus on marginalized populations, such as people of color, the formerly incarcerated and the LGBTQ community.

For now, the Gerards are working on getting the word out about the program and about the restaurant as a place that offers a solution to homelessness as well as good food.

"Portland is a place where people want to be generous. They want to give, and sometimes they're not sure where," Craig Gerard said. "Our pitch to those people is, You need to eat anyway. You may as well get food from us and help solve some of our problem. And by the way, our food is delicious. One of our fans came in and said 'Mission, schmission. This soup is delicious.'"