

Interview with Kelly Letzler

Kelly: I am the Executive Catering Manager for Just 'Cause Catering. I do the kitchen management and operations management of the catering department that we have. I'm in charge of the purchasing of the food, the preparation of the food, managing those who are also preparing the food- the interns and other staff. I am also in charge of delivery and client satisfaction--getting it all done. The one end that I don't deal with is sales. I handle everything from the moment of the sale to the completion of the event.

Just 'Cause Catering is an integral part of Second Helpings. It has been created to help sustain Second Helpings' mission. We [Second Helpings] went to a Butler University MBA class to help create ideas for revenue-generating projects. I think they call it social entrepreneurship now. This is our revenue-generating project. We started it in November just this last year. So far it's been a great kick off. We use all fresh products and we try to focus on organic products, healthy, locally farmed items as well. We cater to other nonprofits and for people in the area.

Second Helpings is a food rescue, hunger relief and job-training organization. Second Helpings goes into the community, rescues over-prepared, underutilize food, re-creates it with the use of a job-training program, and sends it out to the hungry in the neighborhood. The organization serves about 50 agencies and makes about 30,000 meals per day. That's with the use of volunteers. The job-training program uses the donated product as well to help prepare meals for the volunteers for lunch. While preparing those meals, program participants learn skills that help get them out of their current situations. It's a ten-week training program, eight hours a day. At the end of it, we hope to get graduates above entry-level positions so they can hope to make a living wage.

Alissa: What are some of the things that you like about your job?

Kelly: I work with food, which I love. It's very creative and that's always been important to me. I need to have my hands on something, be creative. It's fast paced. It's never the same.

Cooking is an art. It's never the same for me. I am not a rigid follow-the-recipe type of person but with catering you have to be consistent. There is that issue. However, for each client you may have a request to have something different, like a special vegetarian dish that would be fun to create. It's not on the menu so you just kind of pull it out of books and have fun making that.

Alissa: What are some of the things that are more of a challenge about your job?

Kelly: It's a very physical job. It is very physically demanding; you're on your feet all day. At times there's a rush to get things done. That can be taxing as well as mentally exhausting. Getting things all the way finished, getting everything together and out the door and delivered to the client on time—that is demanding. There's not much room for error, you have to be on it.

Alissa: Could take a step back, to what you studied in undergrad, what you were thinking about then and how you made the transition to your current job?

Kelly: It's all kind of come full circle for me. It's really quite interesting. I started at Purdue University, and my original objective was social work. When I started college I was working in a restaurant; it was very exhilarating and fun. I discovered that Purdue had a hotel and restaurant management program. I was like, "That's where I'm going! That's for me. That's where I want to be." I am a very hands-on person. That's how I live and work.

Once I changed my degree objective, I jumped right into restaurant management. I loved it. I just really dove right in. After completing Purdue I went to culinary school. I did some research on culinary schools. Having just spent two and a half years at a university, I asked, "what's the quickest avenue to get this degree, to get this completed?" I found a culinary school in Portland, Oregon, Western Culinary Institute. It's now part of Cordon Bleu. It's pretty cool. So I moved out there; eight hours a day, six days a week, that was our class, but

it was done in a year. It was a really great program and I was able to work at Ruth's Chris [Steak House] part-time. I was cooking. It was all just on the line. We would prepare 300 steaks a night. It was quite demanding! Not a whole lot of creativity involved there. It was just a job to get it done and make a little bit of money to help pay for school expenses.

Alissa: When you were transitioning out of culinary school, what were you thinking about in terms of where to go next?

Kelly: At that point, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I was looking into pastries. I was not really sure. I landed a job in catering as kind of a catering coordinator, helping with sales. I was there for about three years, in a private and public golf club in Oregon. We had banquet facilities on both sides. I managed some of the member services as well. I was really getting more into the sales end of it. I was getting into banquet sales, activities more at the front end of the house. At a point in time I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted to be doing so I thought I would try something new for a while.

At the same time, my husband decided to go back to school. We decided to move back to Indianapolis. I was going to put him through school. I was networking with Jean Paison who is one of the founders of Second Helpings. It just fell into place that their food production manager gave notice about the same time that I contacted Jean. Signs. Meant to be. So I came in and interviewed with Jean and the executive director and it all just fell right into place. For three years I was in charge of the hunger relief kitchen, working with the volunteers.

It was great. We were at a different location, a smaller location. When I started we were doing about 1100 meals per day. We took donated, excess, underutilized, over-prepared and date-expired items from the grocery shelves. They just can't sell it anymore, but it's perfectly good food. We would take that in and re-create it into meals, utilizing volunteer workers and the job-training program as well. Then we would heat them up and send them out the door, and bring them to about 20 different social service agencies in the area. Since then we've transferred into a new location. Under my management, we increased production by about

40% in about a year. We had to increase our volunteer staff. We just kept bringing in more and more. We have a marketing director that kind of knocks on doors for food donations.

It was great. I worked with volunteers. One would be a doctor; then we'd have high school students come in to volunteer. You had to be at least 16--that was our main thing. I found, at the time, that I absolutely loved working with the special needs volunteers. In that way, my career has kind of come full circle; I felt like I was doing the social work thing all over again. Here I am with a social service agency but I'm cooking, doing what I love! It's a good blend of everything.

Alissa: How did you come to be where you are now?

Kelly: We had a director of catering coming in to start up Just Cause Catering. She's in charge of the sales and the implementation of the whole program. When she saw me at work, she noticed my work ethic and drive, and approached me about working on this project. I saw it as a challenge. It was another avenue for me too. Having spent three years in the production kitchen, I felt I needed a little change of pace. But I did not want to leave here. So, what else can I do? How can I further help the mission of Second Helpings, just in a different capacity? It was perfect. So now I'm doing the back of the house catering. A lot of our catering events are for other nonprofits and government. It's great! You get to see other organizations doing their work. You're catering their fundraisers or something like that. It's a lot of fun.

Alissa: What has been the role of mentors or people that you looked to for help during your career?

Kelly: You know, I haven't had one mentor. But I certainly have observed others in their careers and how they go about developing. A really strong influence has been Jean Paison, one of the cofounders of Second Helpings. Her career has been really neat. She started out in pastries, which is what I loved. She saw all the waste. There were two other chefs that came together with her. In their work in the industry, they all saw the food waste so they

decided to come together and create this organization. It's based on a program in Washington, DC. They just joined forces.

Alissa: How did you end up meeting her?

Kelly: I had been out of Indianapolis for six years. My networks just weren't here anymore. My husband went to school with her son. She was the one person that I knew in the restaurant industry. I knew she knew other networks. She was giving me names and leads and it all just kind of came together. She was the only one that I knew how to contact. It just worked.

Alissa: Wow, you never know who you might be connected to! What do you think in your background led you down this path?

Kelly: I ask myself all the time why I chose this type of work. I don't know. I really don't know. My family was not involved in a lot of volunteering. We did a lot as kids but it wasn't really volunteering. Rather, we were just kind of a part of organizations. I was involved in 4-H, which was a huge influence and an avenue for community involvement. I don't know. I think I've always been the middle person. I try to make everyone happy. I think the social service end of it comes from wanting to make other people happy. It makes me feel better. Maybe it's from being a middle child, I don't know.

Alissa: Have you found meaning in this work?

Kelly: I have, I have, absolutely. I'm at a point in my career where I'm thinking, "Where on earth can I go from here? How could it get better than this?" So I've been exploring what other aspects I can work in. One thing that I've been looking into is going back to school and pursuing a master's in social work. I'm trying to figure out how that can work. I'd be very interested in doing one-on-one cooking classes for the special needs students or helping lower income families with their meal needs. I am also interested in just teaching. If I could get into a position where I'm teaching cooking and training skills, it would be fabulous. It's something I'm looking into. Who knows?

Alissa: Can you talk about the ways in which this work has been rewarding?

Kelly: It's the smile on everyone's face. We send out comment card and it's neat to have people's stories come back to you. There are little things like, "oh, we had this child come in today. He had a taco casserole and it's his favorite! His face was just beaming." You know just little things like that. If we helped another organization's fund raiser go off great and everyone really enjoyed the food, it's great. After all, a party is usually about food, at least for me. It just gives you a good feeling, putting a smile on people's faces.

Alissa: And then the flip side, have there been any negatives to doing this work?

Kelly: There are always those you cannot please, and you don't know why. So that's hard. You know that you spend so many hours working on this party. No matter what you would've done, it still comes back with bad remarks or just not satisfied. That's the disappointing part.

Alissa: Have you been ok financially in terms of doing this kind of innovative work?

Kelly: Yeah. I'm certainly not getting ahead but we're making it. I realize that I will probably never seek a position that pays outstandingly huge. So I'm humble.

Alissa: How would you advise someone who is graduating and thinking about the relationship between meaning and money for your work?

Kelly: I don't know. I don't think money buys happiness and happiness is the most important aspect of living. It's interesting to see other people who do make a lot of money and they're going through depression or other certain aspects that make you believe that they're not living a happy life. You know, I wouldn't trade it. I would not trade it.

Alissa: What are some of the changes that you hope to be helping to bring about?

Kelly: I'm hoping to bring awareness into the community, for example, bringing homelessness to the forefront. We work with a lot of on-the-job trainees through our program. They are often in shelters and have had rough lives. How can we help create a system that gets them out of that situation? How can we get them a job that puts them into the industry and gets them out of the shelter? Also, I think that the special needs people have very hidden talents sometimes. It's just phenomenal to see some of their improvements in skills. If you can just give them a simple skill of prep work in the kitchen, they're employable as well. They become some of the best employees you'll probably ever have. I want to be an advocate, helping others.

Alissa: How have your family and friends reacted to your choice of work?

Kelly: They support me fully.. I think a lot of them were not surprised at all that I chose this position. A lot of our friends are also in social service work. A lot of them are teachers and just kind of... down to earth. A lot of my values show in my work. I share these common beliefs with my friends.

Alissa: Do you have suggestions for other people who have gone the culinary route and are interested in doing something with a social service focus?

Kelly: There are so many positions in social service agencies that are culinary related. All the shelters have a kitchen manager. It's amazing. It's not just casseroles all the time either. Sometimes you really have to challenge yourself to create a good meal for the homeless, for the hungry in the shelters. There are also the hospitals that need food for children who have special diets. There's a lot out there.

I do think we're kind of the first catering service that specializes in nonprofit work. One of the programs that we're trying to really kick off is Healthy Minds for Healthy Kids. It's going back to the idea that diet is very important to children's behavior. We're trying to get good healthy food into schools. The largest obstacle with that is that it costs more to prepare healthy food from scratch than it does to buy bulk from a distributor. We're running into

that problem. Hopefully it will go forward. It is unfortunate how many of the behavioral issues are related to sugars in diets.

Alissa: What about suggestions in general for people who are doing civically engaged work?

Kelly: Think about the question, what have you always wanted to do? When you were in high school and you had this big dream of saving the world, how were you going to do it? That's usually it; it's amazing. You just kind of think, "oh, I thought about social work when I was in high school, but I never thought I would really do it." And yet, maybe you've found your calling.