

Liz Neumark, CEO of Great Performances, Women Entrepreneur

By LIZ NEUMARK | MAY 9, 2011



Food has always been a big part of my life. Having a healthy relationship with food has certainly been a challenge growing up a little plump and being on an unending diet but as I have aged that seems to have become just part of the package. Not that I am over it but have come to terms with it.

My mother was an excellent cook and my Grandmother was an incredible baker. I learned from both of them. It isn't surprising that I have always leaned towards an interest in the food industry although have never jumped in as an entrepreneur but have certainly enjoyed the benefits of being part of building different businesses around food such as Ricks Picks, Food52, Hot Bread Kitchen, Joseph Leonard and the other restaurants in the Gabe Stulman empire and a few other food businesses that I will share later.

A few years ago I had the pleasure of meeting Liz Neumark. Rick introduced us and the three of us

got together for drinks. I bumped into Liz again recently and not surprising we had found that we know a variety of the same people.

We had lunch this week at the pop-up James Beard store in the Chelsea Market. Great Performances is the group that makes sure the trains run on time there and also runs the café.

Liz is a rare entrepreneur because she has been morphing her business, Great Performances, for over 30 years. I would say that Liz is a great performance. When I sat down with Liz, I thought her story would be one that went through a series of jobs in the restaurant business that led her to open Great Performances but that is not the case. A third generation Upper West Side girl although she now resides on the UES didn't veer too far from home going to Barnard college majoring in urban studies and political science. Her real passion in college was photography.

After graduating college, she began working as an office temp. She quit her job soon after and started a waitress service with a friend for women in the arts to help supplement their income. She figured doing that would give her more flexibility and a little bit of cash in her pocket to do what she really wanted to do which was practice photography.

What happened is her business just started to grow. Her clients wanted food with the waitress service. This was 1980. As crazy as it seems, caterers were not in abundance back then. The few caterers were a handful of older women. Food was then a whole different ballgame. Liz first built a kitchen at Crosby Street in 1982 eventually moving to a 1500 square foot kitchen/office in Hudson Square and now has a 22000 square



foot operation. The largest off premises catering company in the city and one of the country's largest catering companies in the city generating revenues over \$35 million.

As the business continued to evolve from events to cafes Liz kept thinking about how food has become a commodity and thought it was important to connect to food on a basic level. So in 2006, she bought a farm. Going through a seed catalog and thinking about what will be grown makes one think very differently about food. After having just read *The Dirty Life*, a memoir of Farming, Food and Love by Kristin Kimbal, I get it. Having a farm brings your connection to food to a completely different level. Farming creates community.

Kids and marriage was part of the growth and absolutely defines a big part of who she is today. Liz lost a six year old child less than a decade ago to a brain aneurism. After buying the farm, she launched the Sylvia Center. A non-profit organization that focuses on children's nutrition, farm education and wellness. Engaging at risk inner city kids as well as neighboring towns around NYC who need some guidance and a foundation, the Sylvia Center encourages them using the farm and food as a basis for that. They work with other non-profit groups to make a difference in nutrition particularly as obesity and diabetes has become one of the leading health issues in our country. Not only has the Katchkie Farm located in Kinderhook NY, engaged children they have started a CSA (community sourced agriculture), begun to bring products to market, created a farm to table series and bring products to farmers markets through out the area.

Liz is quite an amazing person. She has been in the food industry for over 30 years an industry that has been predominantly run by men. She is a leader in the industry. Great Performances has partnered with a variety of other operations to operate some of the top event spaces in the city. They serve 1000's of meals a week through catering and putting together events for corporate,

personal and non-profit organizations including a variety of cafes. Liz is involved with the politics of food as well sitting on the Governors Food Policy Council. An incredible impressive yet very down to earth woman.

When we sat down Liz asked me what I was passionate about. My passions range but I have always loved food. For Liz, the passion is obvious, food is her passion and what she has created, a multi-level organization that feeds through our mouth and our soul by thinking about the future through the farm and the Sylvia Center should truly be applauded. Over three decades of growth after just trying to figure out a way to create financial independence to nurture her passion for photography is the perfect entrepreneur story.

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