

Great Performances indeed — How an artist launched one of New York's premiere catering businesses

BY GARY M. STERN

When Liz Neumark launched Great Performances in 1979, it was just a tiny catering service looking to serve food at weddings. Now it's the exclusive catering service for the Plaza Hotel, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Sotheby's and the Apollo Theater. How did Neumark turn Great Performances into one of the premiere caterers in New York?

Neumark, a third-generation New Yorker who lives on the Upper East Side, endured the usual twists, turns and detours of many successful entrepreneurs. After graduating from Barnard College as an urban studies and political science major, she struggled to make a living as a photographer and supervised a temp office to make steady money. That day job turned into a springboard for her career as an entrepreneur.

Tapping the managerial skills she learned at the temp agency, she opened Great Performances Artists as Waitresses, a service dedicated to hiring artists — singers, writers, painters, dancers — as servers at special events. The catering industry was just blossoming, and there were only a couple of competitors back then, she said.

Why name it Great Performances?

"You have to be your own biggest cheerleader. And we wanted to convey there was an artistic component to our waitress service," Neumark replied.

From the beginning, she differentiated it by its style and approach — now we'd call it branding. Neumark spearheaded intensive training workshops on bartending, waitressing and customer service. "Servers had to know more than serve

from the left and clear to the right," she said. When it started in the early 1980s, New York City was facing urban blight, with heightened crime, graffiti-filled subway cars and malaise. "It was a terrible time; cities were dying," she said.

Soon after launching the business, Neumark realized that she had a knack for building, growing and nurturing it. She was skilled at bringing in clients and did her own promotion and PR. Neumark was also affable and sociable and used networking skillfully before the advent of LinkedIn.

For example, she was friends with Laura Kruger, who ran an upscale Madison Avenue jewelry store, and used Kruger's mailing list to identify initial clients. Most clients resided in the city's most affluent zip code, the Upper East Side.

When New York Times reporter Florence Fabricant heard about a fledgling catering service that specialized in hiring artists, she wrote a feature story on Great Performances (the name was shortened). That Times article "put us on the map," Neumark said.

As the catering service grew, Neumark needed to expand her repertoire of skills. She mastered budget planning, organizing the payroll, reading a balance sheet and hiring the right people.

Looking to expand its kitchen, she secured a \$25,000 loan from First Women's Bank in 1982. And in 1992, Great Performances earned its first contract with Wave Hill, a public garden in Riverdale, N.Y. More than 20 years later, it still serves as Wave Hill's caterer.

**GREAT
PERFORMANCES**[®]
Celebrate Food.[™]

Earning contracts for organizations such as Wave Hill and Jazz at Lincoln Center isn't always about submitting the lowest bid. It's often about superior service combined with providing a percentage of revenue.

Year after year, Great Performances has grown and extended its reach. In 2014, it employs 274 full-time staffers and 700 part-timers as wait staff. About half of its revenue is derived from catering contracts and the other half from one-time events (the company won't disclose annual revenue).

Consumers on Yelp praise its sophisticated food. One described its chicken pancake with eggplant caviar as "blini minus the guilt" and said he couldn't stop eating the juniper-cured gravlax on buttered black bread.

Asked to describe life as a female entrepreneur, Neumark laughed and said, "It took me a long time to realize that I had this female entrepreneur disability; I always thought it was an asset." When she meets with bankers, she tells them, "Don't come back and visit unless half of you are in skirts."

SoHo-based Great Performances owns a 60-acre farm in upstate Kinderhook, N.Y., which grows organic produce such as tomatoes, eggplants, carrots and kale. It also produces artisanal products such as Katchkie Ketchup, Thunder Pickles and Bob-A-Que Sauce, which are sold at Zabar's and Dean & DeLuca.

It's also been expanding revenue beyond the New York metropolitan area. It runs the food services for the new Chelsea Piers in Stamford, Conn., the Caramoor Center in Katonah, N.Y., and at the recent Sony tennis tournament in Key Biscayne, Fla.

In the future, she envisions Great Performances branching out on the East Coast into Boston and Washington, D.C., but staying selective about

where it opens. "Caterers that go into other towns often fail miserably," she said.

Neumark and her husband, an attorney, have raised three children, ages 19 to 23. She calls balancing her work life and family as "the secret of women. We know how to multitask and get a million things done."

Though Great Performances has proliferated over the years and no longer hires only artists, Neumark said still about 50 percent of its wait staff are artists. "Years ago, it was only the artists who wanted part-time work. Now the industry is legitimate," she added.