



Giving Back: Healing and Helping with Food

by Denise Shoukas

LIZ NEUMARK OF GREAT PERFORMANCES AND KATCHKIE FARM HAS CHANGED THE FACE OF NEW YORK CITY CATERING AND TOUCHED THE LIVES OF THOUSANDS OF UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN.

Food entrepreneurship and innovation have been a driving force in Liz Neumark's career. In 1979, she founded Great Performances: Artists as Waitresses, a small catering company that, as the name suggests, hired only female artists. She nurtured it into the fourth-largest catering business in the country, known for sourcing locally before it was trendy and offering visually stunning food.

Neumark's success has earned her recognition on Crain's New York Business 100 Most Influential

Women list and the 2009 Ernst & Young New York Entrepreneur of the Year Award. But it's the creation of Katchkie Farm and The Sylvia Center in 2006 that remains closest to her heart. Both were her lifeline while grieving the loss of her 6-year-old daughter, Sylvia, who inspired The Sylvia Center, a nonprofit organization that addresses issues in children's health by providing hands-on experiences with growing and cooking food for children who live in food deserts. Along the way, Neumark has changed the landscape of catering by sourcing much of her ingredients from her own farm. By nurturing others, she found a way to bring joy back into her own life.

EARLY ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVISM

When Neumark started her catering company, it was a time of activism. A stint as a placement officer at a temp agency gave her the chops she needed to jump in and make her own kind of impact.

"It was the age of feminism but there wasn't a lot of opportunity for women back then," Neumark says. With the founding of Great Performances, she strove to give women opportunities in traditionally male roles. Some early clients worried their guests would be offended if the bartender was a woman, she recalls. Times have changed: today, she's proud that one of the company's core values is diversity, seen in its ethnicity, gender, and age breakdown on a staff of 248 fulltime and 784 part-time employees.



Great Performances quickly became known for creating locally sourced, beautiful menus that taste as good as they look. The business serves a wide range of corporate, social, and nonprofit clients, and in 2007 Neumark secured a 25-year contract to cater all events at The Plaza Hotel. Keeping true to her artistic roots, the company holds exclusive contracts at leading cultural institutions in New York City.

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FARMING FOR HEALING AND HEALTH

In the aftermath of losing her young daughter to a brain aneurysm, "I found that the only place where I didn't feel totally shattered was in the farmers market or in farm fields," Neumark recalls. A few months later, she decided to purchase a farm and establish The Sylvia Center.

A year and a half passed before she and her husband found 60 acres in Columbia County to launch the farm and education center. Today, Katchkie supplies Great Performances with fresh produce for special events, as well as farmers markets throughout New York and the company's cafes. The business created the 100 Mile Menu, for which all primary ingredients are sourced from within a 100-mile radius of New York City. The farm's produce is also used for a line of artisanal products, which includes sofi Award finalist Katchkie Tomato Jam, as well as ketchup, salsa, tomato sauce, and more. All profits go toward supporting The Sylvia Center's programs, such as the Teen Chefs: Skills for Life Culinary Program that teaches teens in New York City how to cook fresh, plant-based meals, and the Seed to Plate Program upstate, a series of six 90-minute classes taking place weekly in a school or youth center. Ultimately, the farm is sustained by its successful CSA, which serves 600 members each year.

Neumark finds ways in each area of her business to give back. Katchkie Farm commits 5 percent of its annual harvest to area anti-hunger organizations like Yorkville Common Pantry and City Harvest. The farm strives for environmental sustainability, with such practices as using leftover cooking oil from catering events to heat the greenhouse. In 2014, Neumark implemented a kitchen compost program, and compostable bags are used to deliver the CSA produce.

CONNECTING KIDS TO REAL FOOD

The Sylvia Center program offers several courses, in which children are exposed to a wide variety of fresh food and cooking methods. The goal is to

give kids the knowledge and skills to prepare a healthy meal on their own and make smarter food choices.

A farm visit is built into the program for an engaging hands-on experience. There, kids plant seeds, pull weeds, and harvest vegetables that are used for a community meal at the end of the course. Oftentimes this field trip is the first time children see a carrot pulled from the ground, opening their eyes and fostering a connection to real food.

The Sylvia Center works in an after-school setting, with age groups including children 7-12, teens 13-18, and families. The organization splits its programming evenly downstate and upstate, serving about 2,400 children each year.

In New York City, students typically arrive via public housing and community centers. Others come through the organization's partners, which include GrowNYC, the Children's Aid Society, French Culinary Institute, and New York City Public Schools. In the summer months, programs aim to guide kids to have a healthful experience at summer camps, and winter expansion plans are in the works. In New York City, year-round classes take place in community centers throughout the city.

Great Performances was the initial donor to The Sylvia Center. To create a more sustainable model, the company reduced its contribution to 10 percent, with the remainder of funding coming from grants like the Newman's Own Foundation, partnerships and contributions from other organizations, and individual donors. "The hope is that eventually there will be no kids that need to learn how to cook and eat healthy. But we need to be diversely funded until that's the reality," Neumark says.

A MUTUAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Neumark herself attends the classes as often as possible. "I go because it's the most mind-boggling joyful thing," she says. "We had an LGBT group

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from public housing on the Lower East Side. Their personalities, experiences, and things they're sensitive to are so rich that it takes my breath away to be a part of it."

She particularly loves walking with the kids through Katchkie's children's garden. "They talk about bugs and get to see how food grows," she says. The Salvation Army once brought a group of children from a homeless shelter. Neumark recalls a young girl who was carrying an onion, and a friend pointing out she had no kitchen to use it. Without any appearance of discomfort, the girl replied, "My friend's mom has a kitchen and I want to give it to her."

"You get a window into their worlds, which are so different from when I cater to the very privileged," Neumark says. "It's a selfish joy for me."

Follow-up metrics track impact; the organization has found that 66 percent of youth, teen, and family participants who complete a six-week course significantly improve self-efficacy in the kitchen. Neumark's greatest hope is that kids "walk away smiling because we successfully planted a seed," she says.

Part of the program's success stems from Neumark's approach. "When we work with kids in community centers in New York City, we shop locally at bodegas," making the experience accessible rather than aspirational. "The most value is in the food being fresh and prepared by them. And we want them to eat it with their families."

For many, that's not always possible, but she's continuing to educate with the hope that it will become part of their lives. Best of all, she makes it fun. "We make desserts and cook with sugar," she explains. "Part of the joy is in the balance."

TACKLING BIG ISSUES

Not content to stand on the sidelines, Neumark writes a thought-provoking blog for news site The Huffington Post on food politics and the ever-evolving world of catering. She also serves

on New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's Food Policy Council and on the Advisory Boards for the West Side Campaign Against Hunger, Food and Finance High School, Barnard's Athena Center for Leadership Studies, and Hudson Square Business Improvement District.

She sees the next big challenge as educating the mainstream, particularly her Great Performances clientele. "When I'm serving 500 at The Plaza, I know a lot of those people are taking Lipitor while eating filet mignon. I don't lecture on food but what I want to do is educate around choices and offer delicious, tempting options that are healthier," she says. Neumark laments the slowness of change in the catering world, but that doesn't stop her. "When you're in this world, you think everyone thinks this way, but they don't," she asserts. "The message is radiating out."

SYLVIA'S TABLE

In 2013, Liz Neumark debuted *Sylvia's Table*, a cookbook dedicated to her daughter and filled with lessons and recipes from the farm and The Sylvia Center. Aimed at families who want to cook together, the 200 recipes range from *Sylvia's Stars* and *Moon Soup* to Moroccan tuna skewers with cucumber lemon raita.

"The cookbook is trying to amplify the message of The Sylvia Center," Neumark explains. Overwhelmingly, it's a celebration of fresh food and families cooking together, but it's also a story of grieving. "At the heart of it, I wanted to write something that dealt with bereavement and tells that story. When it comes to a child's death, it's a very touchy subject. I didn't want to make people sad. But people struggle so much with grief—not just the loss of a child but individual loss and illness. I wanted to put it out there."

Neumark wanted to do something positive for her other three children as well, "to remind us all that there is joy in this world," she adds. "What I didn't know was this journey to renewal would occur."

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