

Secrets of Success

an online exclusive from Foodservice East

An ongoing series of interviews with chefs, restaurateurs and foodservice operators, Secrets of Success looks at the paths taken to professional recognition and acclaim.



Liz Neumark wanted to be a photographer when she graduated from Barnard College in 1979, but it was no easy trick to make a living in Manhattan while pursuing an artistic career. Seizing an opportunity, she founded Great Performances, Actresses as Waitresses, as a staffing resource for caterers and a way for others like herself, to have a consistent source of income while pursuing their dreams.

Today, the company now known as Great Performances, has become a premiere catering and event operation in its own right with clients such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola Jazz at Lincoln Center, The Plaza, Sotheby's, Wave Hill and many more and is the fourth largest independently owned catering/events company in the US.

Neumark was named "2008 Industry Professional of the Year" by the Food and Beverage Association of America and last year, was one of Crain's New York Business 100 Most Influential Women.

GP, as it is affectionately called by employees, is said to be the only catering and event company in the country to own, operate and source products from a certified organic farm. It also offers a "100 Mile Menu" option designed for each individual client using ingredients from within a 100-mile radius of the event site.

FSE: How did Great Performances evolve from its beginnings to where it is today?

NEUMARK: In our second year, we were asked to bring hors d'oeuvres and in 1982, we built a kitchen and a woman on the staff became chef. We were too naïve to know what the risks were. We were in the right time at the right place.

FSE: How did your college background in urban studies and political science fit into your career as it evolved?

NEUMARK: It probably helped me dealing with sophisticated New Yorkers! We had people with Master's degrees in their fields. And it may have prepared me for food politics. It defines my personality.

FSE: What's been the secret of your success?

NEUMARK: Great teamwork. We have the most amazing people. Nothing else has ensemble work like catering. Everyone from the truck drivers to the team that books service to the chef is passionate about what they do. We joke that we do 'one night stands.' We thrive on changing the nature of our business, and we get a lot of gratification.

FSE: What's the biggest challenge?

NEUMARK: There are so many – managing growth, the front of the house. The sales part always gets ahead of the back of the house – they close the sale and they go into the kitchen all excited, and the staff is hot and sweaty and tired and wants to go home! We deal with the challenges by communicating a lot, planning a lot and putting incredibly talented people in top jobs.

FSE: What's the biggest thrill in having many of the top cultural and artistic institutions in the city as clients?

NEUMARK: When I can impress my 14-year-old daughter!

FSE: How did you come to do the organic farm upstate?

NEUMARK: We talked about it for six or seven years. It's important to stop commoditizing our business and stay connected to fundamentals. Nothing serves our passion like sniffing fresh arugula.

FSE: Does it shelter you from rising costs this year?

NEUMARK: A little bit, but farming is energy intensive. We try to value engineer menus to make sense for our clients and have more flexibility.

FSE: What impact do you expect the turmoil on Wall St. this year to have on holiday parties and business generally?

NEUMARK: I don't know. We haven't hit bottom, and it hasn't trickled down yet. We know there will be fallout and we all agree there's hope.

FSE: You launched a non-profit, The Sylvia Center, to teach at-risk youth about nutritious food by having them plant, harvest and cook at the farm. What's most rewarding and what successes have you seen?

NEUMARK: It's a joy to focus on those at risk and in danger of chronic diseases. We work with other non-profits, community organizations and school systems, to enhance the health and nutrition programs. The city schools asked us if we could work with them and I think that will grow. It's a non-preaching, fun way to expose little people to the joy of healthy foods. It's a way to give back.

FSE: What do you see ahead for business next year?

NEUMARK: I'm going to stay optimistic. It's a tough climate. But catering is part of the fabric of business. We can offer cost, value and great flavors. We have a nice, diverse client base which is important, great locations, and we listen.

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