

LA Kitchen, DC Central Kitchen, and Campus Kitchens Project: Lessons from a Career Working for Social Justice and Food Security

AN INTERVIEW WITH

**Robert Egger, founder of DC Central Kitchen,
Campus Kitchens Project, and LA Kitchen**

Robert Egger founded DC Central Kitchen, Campus Kitchen Project, and LA Kitchen, which have collectively produced over 40 million meals and helped over 2,000 individuals attain jobs. Founded in 1989, DC Central Kitchen collects wasted food from farms, restaurants, and grocers around Washington, D.C., and uses it to provide culinary job training for individuals who face barriers to employment. DC Central Kitchen also provides school meals and catering services. Amy Ahearn, Associate Director, Acumen, and Alexandria Coari, Capital and Innovation Director, ReFED, spoke with Robert about the lessons he has learned from years of working on issues of food waste, food insecurity, and workforce development.



This interview was produced as part of [The ReFED Nonprofit Food Recovery Accelerator](#).

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AMY AHEARN: *Can you describe how you entered the nonprofit field? What inspired you to found DC Central Kitchen?*

ROBERT EGGER: As a young man growing up in the 1960s, I was always interested in being part of the social change movement. I wanted my life to matter.

I ran nightclubs throughout my 20s, but I was also volunteering in the community. This was at a time when homelessness was on the rise. I served free meals all night to people who would wait outside in the rain. You would see the same people night after night. I asked myself, what is going to happen to these people? Are we liberating them or are we simply satiating them?

One day, I asked a simple question: Where does this food come from? I realized that I worked in a food industry that threw away massive amounts of food every night. I got the idea to collect this wasted food and provide it as meals for shelters and nonprofits. I would use that process to provide culinary training to people who were homeless, suffering from addiction, or recently out of prison. That way, the recipients would be part of the solution.

Restaurants told me they would be willing to donate food if I could pick it up. I started to approach different charities and food banks to share my business plan. Every single charity told me it wouldn't work.

In developing my business plan, I had to make it clear how much food was being wasted. In 1988, that amount was still



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largely unknown. I argued that the average shelter wouldn't know what to do with the odds and ends they received—it was just moving trash around.

Instead, if you brought this wasted food to a central kitchen, you could feed better food to more people for less money. You could

also shorten the line for meals through the provision of job training. At the time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted a 35% increase in food service jobs.

We really used the backdrop of the nation's capital to excite a new generation of donors, philanthropists, volunteers, and elected officials about our model, which was based on “shortening the line” and not merely finding a more efficient way to serve it.

AMY: *Talk me through the different components of DC Central Kitchen. In particular, what are the revenue-generating components?*

ROBERT: Before we begin, it's important to acknowledge that I'm a white man in America. That gave me a lot of benefits that others didn't have. So I became very deliberate about using any opportunity to share those benefits.

I quickly became aware that grantmakers, foundations, and corporations didn't want to push the envelope as I did. So in 1995, we began a model that we called “righteous enterprise” to make our own money.

At first, my understanding of who was hungry was limited to homelessness, which was naive. When I started to realize that

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a large proportion of the homeless were people coming home from prison, I became much more focused on partnerships and getting people jobs.

I saw men and women who did everything right, yet their felony conviction prevented them from getting hired. This was before some of the work we did in D.C. on “Ban the Box,” which made it illegal for employers to ask about a felony conviction on applications. We figured we could provide catering in D.C. and hire men and women who were home from prison.

We developed a principle we call the “calculated epiphany.” It might happen when a volunteer realizes the person they were working next to in the kitchen had been in prison. Or it might be at the end of a party at the British Embassy, when the ambassador announces, “By the way, our caterer tonight was from DC Central Kitchen.”

Imagine if we had said in advance of the party: “Everyone who will serve you tonight has been in prison or homeless. Enjoy the party!” People would have put up barriers. We figured out a way to lovingly challenge people where they’re at.

You have to understand, I came up before the internet. DC Central Kitchen opened

before cable TV. And here we were, collecting food from inauguration parties and training the homeless for jobs—no one had done that before. We had massive media attention.

However, our model has always been 49% focused on what we’re doing as DC Central Kitchen and 51% focused on supporting larger, more important movements. You and I both know, there are some really smart people in Wichita who are never going to have the President of the United States visit their kitchen. We capitalized upon where we were located.

AMY: *Could you share more about how you’ve supported larger movements in the industry?*

ROBERT: I tend to embrace the ideas of probability or futurism. In the late 1990s and 2000s, I challenged the explosion and growth of food banks, who all wanted to build endowments and capital campaigns to build elaborate facilities. It did not make me many friends.

What I was trying to tell them was this: All wasted food is lost profit. People in this sector do not get that. Sadly, there’s an anti-hunger movement that has avoided deep reflection on how to squeeze every ounce of opportunity out of every pound of food. And, more importantly, what are the policy

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initiatives we should be pursuing to limit the number of people who are hungry?

Over my lifetime, I've done every kind of revenue-generating strategy you can do with food. I talk to a lot of social entrepreneurs. I don't want to hear about the product. The first question I ask them is: Who is the customer who is going to buy your product?

If you enter retail, you're going to have to really fight. Let's say you sell in local farmers markets and your dream is a large national retailer. Unfortunately, I believe that large national retailers aren't going to help you support the local economy, pay good wages, have recyclable packaging, and buy local food. They're trying to maximize every ounce of profit they can get. So what's your plan?

In the late 1990s, we started buying local food. This is where I want to give credit to Mike Curtain who came on board in the early 2000s. I still believe the greatest opportunity for social enterprise and food-based social enterprise is going to be local food contracts.



IMAGE CREDIT: DC CENTRAL KITCHEN

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AMY: Talk more about how entrepreneurs should go about seeking those contracts and what you learned in LA versus what you learned in DC about what does and doesn't work.

ROBERT: I laid the groundwork for our school food contracts in DC. I was the chair of the Mayor's Commission on Nutrition and we pushed hard for what a food contract should look like. We also had the support of Mayor Adrian Fenty and the First Lady of the United States. That really helped a lot.

When I proposed this model in LA, I ran into quite frankly a more challenging system. Now, this is not unique to LA. Food service contracts in America—whether they're senior meals, which I think are a giant opportunity for social enterprise, whether it's school food, whether it's prison food—are dominated by big food service contractors.

They are aggregators working for every contract they can get because it gives them purchasing power. Through this purchasing power, they can mandate terms to give them highly reduced prices.



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Our model in DC proved it was possible to buy reduced-price local produce and save enough money to be competitive, while still paying good wages. We were often trying to relieve people of these urban myths: “Oh, we’d love to serve local food but it costs too much money.” “We’d love to do this, but the kids and seniors won’t eat it.”

These are the canards that Big Ag and food service companies put out. They even arranged ridiculous studies about how much food kids were throwing away. It’s funny because these studies were funded by the dairy industry, but milk is what gets thrown away the most.

We wanted to expose people to the larger truth that you could generate wealth, buy local, save money, pay good wages, and still be competitive. That’s important because at the end of the day, you know most contracts come down to the bid. Big food service companies dominate because they can always outbid.

DC Central Kitchen and LA Kitchen were paying \$13.50 with full benefits long before it was mandated. We were able to do this by purchasing local at a reduced price. But for this to happen, it is essential to have good food purchasing policies, like those

developed by the LA Food Policy Council and now being replicated around the country. Those policies also need to have teeth behind them or no one will comply.

In Los Angeles, I was active in promoting legislation that created the first registration system for social enterprises. If you were a certified social enterprise in LA County, you got first dibs at a contract. Although they didn’t use this language, the policy was based on the understanding that low bid is where low wages and exploited profit comes from. These low wages cause the need for charity.

Instead, let’s set up a system that prioritizes businesses that buy local and pay good wages. There should be hiring preferences for certain subgroups, such as returning veterans, felons, or people who were raised in foster care. Most importantly, they should reinvest the profit.

I’m advocating for local legislators to adapt the Good Food Purchasing Act to actually insert language that move away from low bid as the winning priority. Hidden rebates—or basically kickbacks—are another reason that food service companies win key contracts.

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IMAGE CREDIT: DC CENTRAL KITCHEN

ALEXANDRIA COARI: *We've talked about how much money is tied up in large corporations and the need for policy change. But that may be a medium-to-long-term game. Given the realities of this system, what are the most immediate things that you think social innovators should be doing right now?*

ROBERT: I've had one of the rarest, luckiest rides in the nonprofit sector. After about 60 cities, two kitchens, and then Campus Kitchen Project, I've come to a larger truth. I believe that, sadly, very few people in leadership in this sector want to think about politics.

So to your point, I'm a shortcut man—not out of laziness, but because every single day another 10,000 people will turn 65 years old. That's not going to stop.

This has led me to what I believe is the ultimate imperative: How do you elect a generation of elected officials who show up on day one aware of the environmental costs of food waste, the potential social enterprise opportunities of food waste, and then embrace these opportunities and race toward them?

I've been involved in dozens of candidate forums on food waste. I believe every single

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candidate for governor, mayor, and president should be talking about food policy. Every city contract should be about social enterprise and keeping the money local. Our sector has been too timid.

That brings me back to our initial conversation about why I got into the nonprofit sector. As a kid, I watched Dr. King's house get firebombed while his children slept. I saw Malcolm X get assassinated. I saw Cesar Chavez going on a 25-day fast. I saw Robert Kennedy risk every political coin he had to stand next to Cesar Chavez and help him break his fast with a

small piece of communion bread, which I think exemplifies the power of food. So I've been called self righteous. I've been called a bomb thrower. But that's where I'm coming from—these men and women who are our spiritual leaders really took risks on behalf of our people. We should 100% be willing to consider that same level of risk or at least calculated risk.

Let's show the country what happens when you elect a mayor who is hell bent on supporting the local food system and contracting with social enterprises that hire the hard-to-employ and pay a good



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wage. How many jobs were created? How many payroll taxes were paid? How many farmers were able to expand their property holdings, rebuy property or expand their crop? What are the health care benefits for a generation of elders?

AMY: *What do you see as some of the greatest threats in the near term?*

ROBERT: You know, one of the imperatives for our movement will be responding to an older generation that is going to break our piggy bank. We can barely meet the needs of the estimated 45 million people who are at risk of hunger. What happens when you add 5, 10, or 15 million baby boomers who are not only hungry every day, but who lack the physical ability to reach the pantry or food bank?

Don't forget, our entire system of distribution was primarily developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of the 60,000-plus pantries in America are open Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and they lack a significant amount of refrigeration space. What happens if the policymakers decide to ban food waste? Do you think these charities can absorb that much food? Never in a million years. This is a real make-or-break moment. Every time I'm asked to contribute to

these kind of conversations, I try to interject a sense of urgency. Food banks, food pantries... they're just not ready for this. Many have been wedded to their current model and they haven't invested.

AMY: *What are the social enterprise models that you think people should be building right now? What advice would you have for those entrepreneurs?*

ROBERT: It's going to be city contracts. But sadly, so many contracts are built around a six-week cycle menu. Basically, these menus say that five weeks from now on a Tuesday, we're going to serve peaches. Let's say that five weeks from now on Monday, you get a call from somebody who says, "I have pallets of the most amazing pineapples that I can't sell. They're ripe today and no one is going to buy them. Will you buy them now for five cents on the dollar?" You know you could serve the pineapple tomorrow and they would be so flavorful. But you can't say yes because it would break the cycle menu.

Then there is nutrition and meat alternatives. The only way to feed this many seniors, for instance, is not by immediately going vegetarian or vegan. We should start by replacing the standard 3-ounce serving of meat protein with 1.5 ounces of meat and 1.5 ounces of an alternate protein as

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a bridge. This will help carnivorous and reluctant seniors begin to travel down this new imperative road. This has cost benefits, of course, but also health benefits and environmental benefits.

There have always been alternative meats, but for years, the texture was really rotten. Now with Beyond Meat and other protein alternatives, you have food that is much healthier for seniors and much easier for them to digest. And with flavor and texture components that really mirror the meat that they grew up with, particularly if you're going to incorporate it into a

casserole, a taco, or an enchilada. One of the things I did in LA was show the power of an international menu to disguise healthier meals and make them robust, dynamic, and flavorful.

There are progressive city council members who are ready to be allies in healthy food and social enterprise job opportunities. We need to start working with them to promote the kind of legislation that doesn't reward the tools that corporate America has employed to corner the market. If you take those out of the equation, that levels the playing field for social enterprises.



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IMAGE CREDIT: DC CENTRAL KITCHEN

ALEXANDRIA: What is the future for you and for the kitchens? Do you have any advice for the nonprofit entrepreneurs in this program and anybody else who's looking to do work in the food recovery space?

ROBERT: Well, I'm one of the lucky people in our sector. But at the same time, I have to acknowledge that I lost people money and I take that very seriously. So I don't want to have the hubris of starting another nonprofit.

And again, I'm a white man in America. The reality is that your generation doesn't need another white man trying to stay relevant. I've opened kitchens around the country and Jose Andres has taken the model globally. I've been one of the most productive and successful leaders in our sector. I don't need to prove myself.

For the remainder of my career, I want to be able to serve a younger generation. I'm taking a metaphorical knee. I take phone calls from people, including social entrepreneurs, all week who just want to talk and exchange ideas. I think that's the best role I can play.