

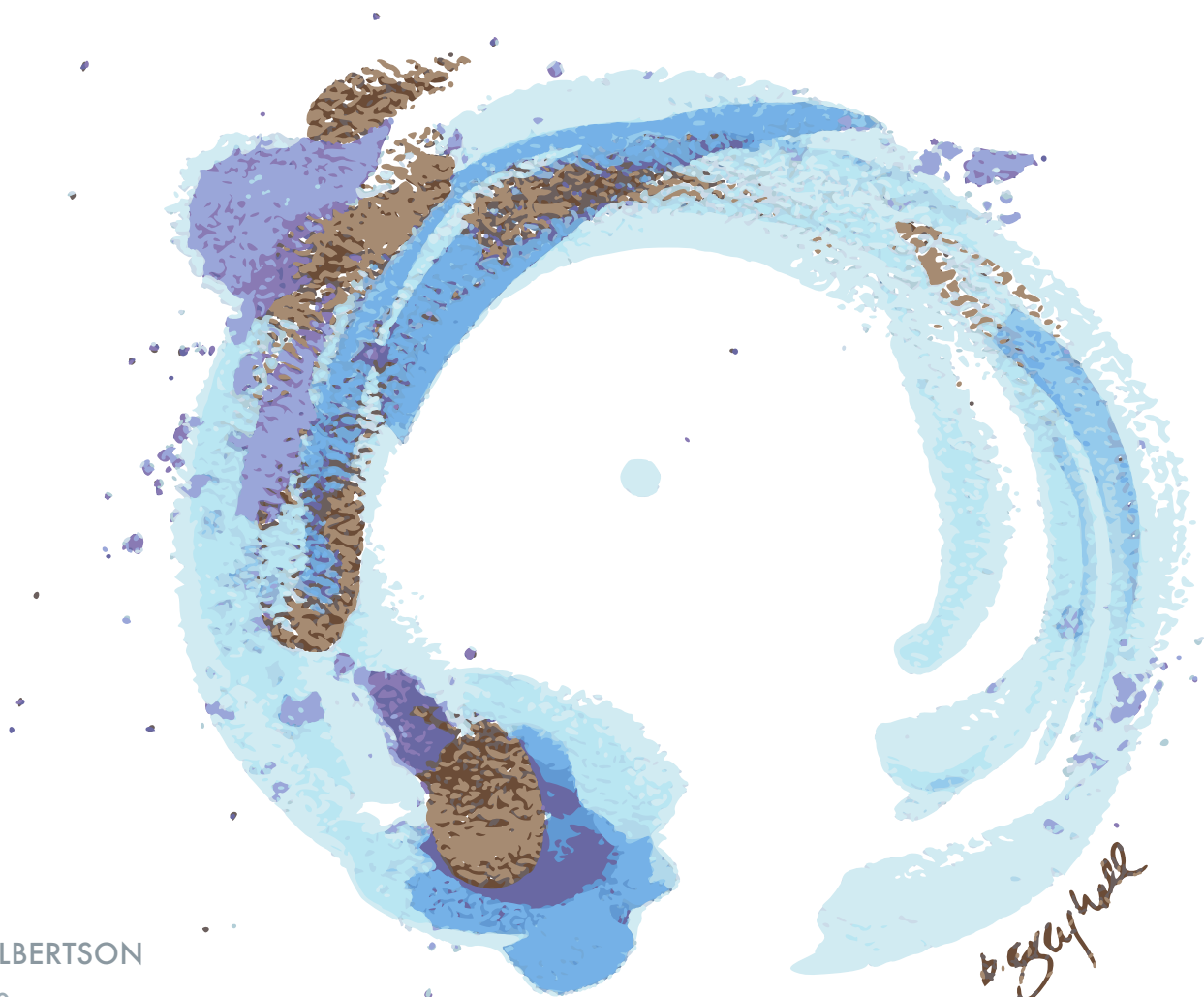


COMMUNITY FOR CHANGE



Featured Organizations: PS Kitchen

PS KITCHEN MEETS JOY



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cvcommunityforchange.org

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PS Kitchen Meets Joy

The core design ideas of the Community for Change are joy, non-obligation, and passion matching. But perhaps it all boils down to unleashing joy.

MAY 21, 2020

PS Kitchen has become a home to the Community for Change and its founder, April Tam Smith, a dear friend and CFC member. The second floor of the restaurant especially has welcomed soaking dinners, client gatherings with Coburn Ventures, and last month we were scheduled to have a CFC spring gathering there (perhaps the biggest CFC gathering we've ever had), postponed due to COVID-19.

If you are not familiar, PS Kitchen is a tucked-away vegan restaurant in Times Square, often frequented by Broadway attendees or Broadway stars themselves. In a tourist-heavy area where most of your options are the likes of Bubba Gump Shrimp, to me, PS Kitchen feels like a haven of warm colors, healthy and delicious food, and New York authenticity. In the city's nucleus of consumption and consumerism – perhaps the world – PS Kitchen encourages us all not to take, but rather to give, and to give in a radically generous way.

PS Kitchen stands out from other restaurants for another reason – it is structured as a nonprofit organization. The “PS” reflects the social change the business is creating in New York, a post-script (not an afterthought) to its high-quality atmosphere and food. On each menu, the 3 PSs of their business model are listed:

- 1. CREATING JOBS FOR THOSE MARGINALIZED IN NEW YORK, SUCH AS CLIENTS OF OUR PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS.**
- 2. DONATING 100% OF PROFITS TO SUSTAINABLE CHARITABLE WORK LOCALLY AND OVERSEAS.**
- 3. PROVIDING NEW YORKERS WITH DELICIOUS FOOD OPTIONS THAT ARE KIND TO THE BODY AND THE EARTH.**

The restaurant intentionally hires New Yorkers who have high barriers to employment elsewhere, such as a history of incarceration or high levels of trauma. PS Kitchen becomes a place where they can reintegrate safely back into the workplace and gain skills and strong references for future jobs. Many of PS Kitchen's employees were first a client of some nonprofits



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in the CFC.

New York restaurants were hit hard by COVID-19, and PS Kitchen has been no different. You could argue that the PS Kitchen community has been hit even harder since their employees are some of the most vulnerable in the city with a lot to lose if they are unable to take home an income.

The reality of our post-COVID world has revealed to us all just how delicately held together our social systems are – how many people do not have the luxury of being able to work from home, or live off savings for a month or two if need be, to choose not to come to work because it does not feel safe, to socially distance from family members of whom they are the primary caregivers. None of these vulnerabilities in our social fabric are new...they have been here all along, it just seemingly took a global pandemic for many of us to fully understand them.

I use social fabric intentionally, because there more threads, or variables that hold our society together than we can comprehend, especially when it comes to the weaker parts. Mental health, employment, exposure to addictive substances, family responsibilities or dynamics, housing, and healthcare are all highly correlated and complex. A change one triggers a change in the other. It is not easy to pinpoint the root source of a challenge. Where a dynamic is a cause or effect is hard to pinpoint.

We all have gotten a bit of a crash course in public health over the last two months, and we all now know how frightening it can be when you are trying to address something that has a seemingly infinite number of variables – how do you flatten the curve and keep as many people coronavirus-free while doing minimal damage to the economy and to people's well-being? I don't think when the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Manhattan, most New Yorkers were able to fully wrap their heads around just how quickly that one case would spread, doubling and doubling, and just how fast so many of the interconnected variables of our lives would change.

I've been thinking about how April seems to be a master of managing many, many variables all at once. Intellectually, no doubt this has contributed to her professional success for over 15 years at Morgan Stanley. More generally, she has learned how to balance her work on both Wall Street and at PS Kitchen, volunteering, her friends, and her family. When putting together the business model of PS Kitchen, April and Graham understood just how many variables come together to make up both spiritual and material poverty, and they have accounted for many. Every decision made regarding the restaurant is done by thinking how to optimize for impact, grow it multiple-fold. Every level of the social enterprise's model from supply chains, to hiring, to revenue allocation is designed to make New York a better place. If the equation for the average nonprofit is $1+1 = 2$, PS Kitchen adds up to $1+1 = 10$.



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April founded PS Kitchen with her husband, Graham, in 2017. Both were (and still are) working demanding Wall Street jobs and their lives were already oriented towards a deep service for others. April sits on the board of multiple nonprofit organizations, volunteers with a prison ministry in New York, and travels to Haiti every year to work with organizations there. The couple has lived with roommates in Harlem for their entire marriage – a lifestyle more akin to that of a recent college graduate in the city, not a married couple where both have had a highly successful career in finance (except, in this case, roommates’ rent is covered and the sum is donated). Both April and Graham are passionate about their Christian faith and “reverse tithe” – rather than voluntarily give away 10% of your wealth, a Biblically-based guideline many Christians and churches use, the Smiths live on 10% and give away 90%.

April still felt called to do more, and soon after getting married, they took a pretty big risk: signing a 15-year lease for a restaurant in Times Square...a risky business in an expensive neighborhood in an industry they had no experience in. The restaurant is structured where April and Graham don’t take salaries and 100% of profits are given away – since 2017, they have been able to fund the restaurant, pay employees, and give away over \$130,000, including building multiple schools in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They have hired over 50 people in the last three years. April knows all of their stories intimately and talks about her coworkers full of joy and dignity. The restaurant has been spotlighted in CBS, a video with Oprah, and multiple other media outlets. This year, they were the recipient of the New York Restaurant Association’s 2020 Torch Award.

They are creators of value far beyond the income they are generating or the food they are providing for the city – the jobs they are providing don’t just have an economic means, but also speak truth to employees that they have inherent worth and dignity. This crisis has shown a clear delineation of the “haves” and the “have nots” in our world. And with that, many of us have perhaps come to the realization of just how much we depend on the “have nots”...and how much we undervalue their contributions. Every parent of young children I have spoken to over the course of the last few weeks has said something along the lines “we need to be paying our teachers more.” There is a distortion in how we are valuing people and how we are valuing work.

I have had conversations with many Christians about how the economic systems Jesus espoused would have been the opposite of our systems today – he would have turned everything upside down. April and Graham have practiced this with reverse tithing, but they are also doing this by challenging the notion that value is equated to economic output. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes these instructions to one of his letters to the church of Corinth: “Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” April and Graham are challenging New York to think about this new orientation.



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Almost two months ago now, April wrote a letter to the PS Kitchen community in response to the changes they were up against with COVID-19, where she penned, “my heart is breaking, especially given our mission for creating jobs for those in need.” There was an almost irony that while the main purpose of PS Kitchen is to support those who are among some of the most marginalized right now, they could not.

She sounded the call for action from the PS Kitchen community – and people responded. PS Kitchen has been able to stay open the last four weeks through the donations of others, funding work for employees as they make food not for the New York public right now, but for healthcare workers in hospitals in the city. They have been able to donate well over 2,500 meals as of last week. Here is another kind of compounding variable – a dollar given to PS Kitchen not only helps a marginalized worker, or a hardworking medical professional right now...it does both.

We call these CFC writing pieces “joy pieces” because joy is a central design principle to the CFC, especially since so many of us work in industries where it is, most days, much easier to see what is wrong in the world rather than what is right. Those of you who have met April or have spent time in PS Kitchen know that it does not take much time to see how central joy is to the culture they are building there, for both customers and for employees. And I can’t wait for the day when the CFC can all gather together there again.

I think one of the reasons why April carries such a spirit of joy is because joy, or happiness, is comprised of multiple, multiple variables too. Not all move in the same direction – some of the happiest countries are made up of people who are the most materially poor. In the western world, we know that happiness and wealth are correlated only up to a certain point and then it plateaus. There isn’t one algorithm to happiness – just like there isn’t one algorithm to alleviate poverty, or to end COVID-19 and enable life to resume back to normal. Each are all-encompassing metrics made up of many variables. On the surface, COVID-19 is just a virus, an infectious disease made up of statistics like infection rates and death rates. But, as we all know, the effects of the virus run much deeper, likely in ways that will fundamentally change the way we live – some for the worse, some for the better. On the surface, PS Kitchen is just a restaurant, but anyone who has spent time in that space knows it is much more – a mission that can remind us that we are, perhaps, our brother’s keeper, and the joy that can explode with a heart turned towards radical dreams and service towards others.

