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## EPILOGUE

# Kitchens for Good: Matching Purpose and Sustainability During the Pandemic

One year later, in the Fall of 2021, Kitchens for Good's (KFG) CEO Jennifer Gilmore found herself at a different stage of a pandemic that had swept the globe, ended lives, upended routines, distorted economies, and left the world changed in ways that were only beginning to become clear. In the first half of 2021, COVID-19 vaccines became distributed widely among the U.S. population. By mid-2021, the State of California lifted restrictions and allowed restaurants, bars, theaters, and other businesses to open fully.<sup>1</sup> By late 2021, 62% of people of all ages in California were vaccinated.<sup>2</sup>

For KFG, the 2020 decision to move from the Jacobs Center to the Door of Hope had reduced the monthly rental expenditure from \$27,000 to \$6,000. With this decision and other efforts to cut down expenses, KFG ended the 2021 fiscal year with \$200,000 in gross profits, which, according to Jennifer, left KFG "in the best financial position it has ever been in."

"The other thing we did throughout 2021," Jennifer explained,

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<sup>1</sup>Meisenzahl, M. (2021, April 6). California to lift pandemic restrictions on June 15, allowing restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and other businesses to fully open. *Business Insider*. Retrieved October 20, 2021 from <https://www.businessinsider.com/california-covid-restrictions-ending-june-restaurants-bars-movie-theaters-2021-4>

<sup>2</sup> Tracking coronavirus in California: Latest map and case count. (n.d.). *The New York Times*. Retrieved November 19, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/california-covid-cases.html>

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*was to continue to examine our earned revenue streams. This included asking tough questions of the culinary job training program: Did it still make sense to train people for jobs that could disappear in future national lockdowns, economic recession or other similar events like the ones we experienced during COVID-19?*

This question motivated the team as they began to consider broadening their portfolio of initiatives, perhaps including training in coding and cybersecurity, and perhaps changing the name of the enterprise to “Industries for Good.” However, with the reality of mass vaccinations and the opening of businesses, the management team and the board of directors decided to remain focused on the food service industry and job-related training. With this decision in a world that had changed, they asked themselves: Beyond cost savings, what strategies should KFG pursue to achieve financial sustainability?

### **Towards a New Model**

Jennifer and her team felt they “couldn’t compete with restaurants and larger caterers.” Instead, they started devising what they called “Kitchens on Call,” where KFG apprentices could pick up shifts from an expanded network of KFG’s employee partners. Apprentices could gain experience working for a range of 144 employers, and employers could fill staff shortages without committing to hiring permanent staff in an uncertain economy. As this approach evolved, it came to resemble a staffing placement service, whereby apprentices could have more stable hours with the potential to secure employment benefits (e.g., health, dental, retirement). In Jennifer’s words, “The hospitality industry was suffering labor shortages and the apprentices needed to earn a living while they learn. We felt we could take these two needs and make it into an opportunity.” KFG would charge a 25% service fee based on the apprentice’s hourly rate.

When the pandemic arrived, Jennifer stated “they went from 100 to zero overnight” in terms of training activities and customer demand for catering. Therefore, to ensure the capacity to continue fulfilling KFC’s mission of using “food to transform lives and nourish communities by providing people with the skills and support to launch meaningful careers,”<sup>3</sup> the organization started to consider new revenue streams. That thinking led her and the team to the idea of opening a retail outlet called Shop Kitchens for Good. The outlet would be an “omni-channel retail experience” featuring kitchen items made by apprentices, products from local social enterprises, donated products from corporations, and previously used kitchen items. Jennifer’s confidence that there would be demand for such a shop was bolstered by the donation of high-end goods from corporate donors like Richard Ginori, an established producer of luxury dinnerware. Her confidence was further buoyed by the fact that an experimental pop-up shop held in June 2021 had exceeded expectations, with sales 50% above forecast. Because this initial concept had attracted more donations and generated more revenue than anticipated, on August 8, 2021, the board approved the leasing of an over 5,000-square-foot storefront in a popular beach community. For Jennifer, their “omni-channel” approach would be underwritten by “an elevated shopping experience that included a planned expansion into online sales.” The shop’s soft launch was scheduled for December 2021, just in time for the holiday season.

With the catering business wiped out by the pandemic, KFG decided not to renew their partnership with Moonlight Theater. As the pandemic eased up, they did accept an invitation to serve soup, sandwiches, and sweets at the Rady Shell, a high-profile outdoor concert venue that

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<sup>3</sup> Kitchens for Good. (n.d.). *About us*. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://kitchensforgood.org/about-us/>

opened its doors to the public in July 2021. As of September, it was a breakeven operation, but Jennifer was excited by the opportunity to get the KFG brand in front of symphony attendees, who were not only potential customers but also potential donors. After every weekend, the team reviewed the growing email list of interested patrons, leading Jennifer to exclaim, "It's a fun and worthwhile endeavor."

For Jennifer, KFG was filled with energy and ideas in an industry and a world that had been affected drastically. In addition to changes related to COVID-10, Aviva Paley, co-founder of KFG, announced in July 2021 that she was stepping back from a leadership role at KFG. That meant both co-founders of KFG, Aviva and Chuck Samuelson, were now gone from management. With everything they had experienced in the last year, Jennifer reflected on the opportunities ahead: "We must always have in mind our mission: breaking the cycles of food waste, poverty and hunger through innovative programs in workforce training, healthy food production, and social enterprise." She added:

*We are growing new things and developing new initiatives related to our core (kitchen and hospitality industry) and we need an outstanding team. They are highly motivated and engaged right now. We are going to need to keep this team intact, pacing ourselves so that we not only accomplish all of this, but we do it really well. We will end the year 2021 with so much of a heavy lift: we are opening an online store, we are opening a bricks and mortar store, we are starting a temporary employment agency, and we just launched two new apprenticeship programs in hospitality and baking.*

She asked herself, "What would be required of her leadership team to develop the opportunities to fulfill KFG's mission? What would be necessary to succeed in these new and exciting ventures?"

## References

1. Meisenzahl, M. (2021, April 6). California to lift pandemic restrictions on June 15, allowing restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and other businesses to fully open. Business Insider. Retrieved October 20, 2021 from <https://www.businessinsider.com/california-covid-restrictions-ending-june-restaurants-bars-movie-theaters-2021-4>
2. Tracking coronavirus in California: Latest map and case count. (n.d.). The New York Times. Retrieved November 19, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/california-covid-cases.html>
3. Kitchens for Good. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://kitchensforgood.org/about-us/>