

NATALIE GUO: Today, we partner with 110 restaurants around the country. And at the end of this week, we'll have served over 200,000 meals to health care workers, and as a part of that provided over \$1 million in economic relief to those workers. And to me, that's what we set out to do.

[ MUSIC ]

INTERVIEWER: Hello, and welcome to "We Roar." With coronavirus still threatening our health and our communities, we're asking Princetonians everywhere to share how they're rising to the challenge, how they're seeking solutions wherever they can, and how they're envisioning a post-COVID world. In this episode, we hear about starting a nonprofit organization and scaling it up at lightning speed.

[ MUSIC ]

NATALIE GUO: Hi, everyone. My name is Natalie Guo, and I am a proud member of the Great Class of 2012 at Princeton. Normally, I am a full-time medical student at Harvard Medical School. And during the COVID crisis, I launched a national nonprofit called Off Their Plate.

So I'll take you back a few months ago during which I was on my surgical rotation at Mass General Hospital in Boston. And that particular day, trainees and many residents had been sent a notification that we would start to be withdrawn from the hospital, and elective operations were going to be discontinued, and the hospital was really preparing for the acute phase of COVID.

And so the next morning, I thought about how many of the physicians, the nurses and hospital staff were being told the opposite, which was they had to keep showing up to work and, uh, put themselves at risk during this time to take care of others. And at the same time, my husband had been listening to a podcast about 5 to 7 million estimated restaurant industry workers who would be unemployed as a result of all the shutdowns.

And so, putting those two things together, I thought there might be an interesting way for us to provide some wages to food industry workers and have them serve meals to hospital workers that, you know, from my own experience, I knew that a lot of hospital cafeterias were shutting down. And they were being asked to eat out of vending machines or prepare their own meals, which was quite unrealistic when, um, when staff are working 18 to 30-hour shifts at the hospital.

And for health care workers, we are inundated on the media — rightfully so — with images of how difficult it is that everyone is able to shelter at home. But you are called to duty to, sort of, expose yourself — and, and your family members, ultimately — to COVID at a higher rate so you can take care of others. And because the US was one of the later countries to be exposed to COVID, we saw the infectious rates for health care workers in China and Italy. And I know firsthand that in the hospital, a lot of questions from clinical and non-clinical staff was, is that going to be us?

And I'm thinking specifically of food industry workers, to imagine, you know, that their whole livelihoods have been discontinued during COVID — is, is really heartbreaking.

[ MUSIC ]

And so I reached out to a handful of restauranteurs in Boston. And there were two that responded, Tracy Chang and Ken Oringer. They both run elevated restaurants and restaurant groups in Boston. And so I spoke to them and pitched an idea of serving, you know, Bento box-style, nourishing meals to hospital workers for \$10 a meal.

And these would be 100% paid for by donations that I would collect. And I asked that over half of those donations go directly to the restaurant staff that are most vulnerable in their restaurants. And the reason is because at this time, certainly businesses are struggling and business owners are struggling, but I think it's hard to argue that individual workers, particularly those that do not qualify for unemployment, are by far the most marginalized and most economically vulnerable right now. And so, my ask that over 50% of donations be sent to them directly was the basis of providing economic relief geared towards individuals over businesses.

I started a PayPal pool. And within a day maybe, we had raised about \$10,000. And so we had enough to run a test pilot. And so our test was to send 90 meals to Brigham and Women's Hospital, which is one of the acute care centers in Boston. Tracy Chang at PAGU was the pilot restaurateur.

And we worked out the economics so that 90 meals would cost \$900. And we kind of tested the, you know, how streamlined the operations were. She hired back several of her staff who would not be eligible for unemployment. We quickly realized that this was really impactful to those workers.

I showed up to the restaurant that day as well and had a chance to, to, to speak to them, and it went really well. The meals were well received from the hospital, and we sort of launched from there.

[ MUSIC ]

We've grown to an organization of 200 people who are all volunteer-based, all young professionals in the business industry, and in the food industry, and health care industry. And it's really through the sheer effort and commitment of these 200 individuals that we're able to scale to what we are today.

And so after serving that initial pilot meal on March 19th, we started a regular rotation with two restaurants in Boston. We started getting press coverage, and then a lot of volunteers — from Princetonians, from the Harvard community — and, uh, from there on, we organically grew to New York City, which is sort of the highest COVID-need city in the United States — in the world, actually.

Yeah, organically, went to San Francisco, and really, you know went to cities, I think, of

highest COVID burden. And since then, the organization has, has scaled — in part, organically, in part from a deterministic, sort of, “This is where we should be, and these are the hospitals we should serve.”

[ MUSIC ]

Today, we partner with 110 restaurants around the country, and the many staff who are a part of those restaurant families. At the end of this week, we’ll have served over 200,000 meals to health care workers, and as a part of that, provided over \$1 million in economic relief to those workers.

And to me, that’s what we set out to do. It’s not just meals delivered. It’s how thoughtful we have been in acting responsibly and proactively thinking about the safety of everyone who’s involved in our operations. We make sure that if we’re going to be hiring workers in some way, that they understand that this will actually provide income continuity — as opposed to a lump sum check one week, and the next week, we’re not there.

And then the last thing, around sanitation and safety, has been us constantly thinking about what models of participation in Off Their Plate are actually best for vulnerable workers. And I think that’s an incredible — incredibly important aspect of what we do, is we strive to think in an innovative way about how to distribute relief and pay for work without incentivizing those who are economically disadvantaged to expose themselves to undue health risk.

[ MUSIC ]

It’s not caviar. It’s not lobster. It’s something nutritious packed with, you know, love. And I think that’s sort of what drew a lot of chefs to it. I think it’s that moment of realizing, you know, yes, our business historically has been, you know, providing creative and artisanal cuisine. But in this moment of crisis, could we go back to the basics, which is providing food that makes people feel good.

And, um, we get so many thank you letters and notes from those who say that they’ve been eating out the vending machine, or the unit sometimes provides pizza. But, you know, they’re in their suits. And by the time they come out of their protective suit, the pizza is cold, or the food is gone. And so you know, they sit down, and they realize someone has saved them a hot meal from these restaurants they know and love in the Boston community or in whatever city.

Yeah, it’s really heartwarming that — people talk about tearing up, and people talk about just feeling really loved by the community — by strangers. It’s that sort of idea that the community appreciates your work, and that they’re infinitely thankful for what you do.

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