

New Beginnings



Photograph by Barry Fitzgerald

The worker-owners of Colors restaurant include members of the wait staff (left to right); Awal Ahmed from Bangladesh; Rosario Cera from Mexico; Sonali Mitra from India; and Memon Ahmed, Mohamed Quddus, and Mohamed Ali, all from Bangladesh.

These articles by Barbara Schoetzau of the Voice of America and Carol Hymowitz of the Wall Street Journal tell the stories of several survivors of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks who turned tragedy into a new beginning for themselves and their families.

Restaurant Owned by September 11 Survivors Is on a Mission

In a city like New York, which has more than 15,000 restaurants, it is tough to attract attention. But the new restaurant Colors stands apart because of its ownership. Colors is owned by a group of surviving immigrant employees from Windows on the World, the restaurant that occupied the top floor of one of the World Trade Center towers that were destroyed in the September 2001 terrorist attacks.

One of the most enduring images of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on New York is that of a white-clad figure, his chef's hat pointing downward, falling

though space. He apparently jumped 106 stories to escape the flames and intense heat of the fire.

More than 70 employees and 100 customers of Windows on the World died in the inferno.

Now the surviving restaurant workers—waiters and waitresses, busboys and cooks—are running their own restaurant, called Colors.

For the workers, like bartender Patricio Valencia, the restaurant is a tribute to their lost colleagues and a symbol of independence.

“After the tragedy, it was so hard to find a job. After three years of working hard every week, every month, finally this is a reality.”

The new restaurant owners, representing more than 20 nations, have contributed recipes from their native countries to the menu, giving it a decidedly international flavor. Diners can choose from a menu that spans the globe: Colombian shredded pork and rice, Philippine spring rolls, Thai chicken and papaya, Italian risotto, Haitian conch salad, Congolese seafood, Peruvian rice cakes.



Photograph by Barry Fitzgerald

Kissima Saho (foreground), line cook from the Ivory Coast, and Jean Pierre, sous chef from Haiti, prepare a variety of menu items in the ergonomically designed kitchen. Cutting and preparatory stations are higher than normal so workers do not strain their backs by bending over too much.

Fekkad Mamdouh says the food and atmosphere set Colors apart. “The chef worked with every worker to take something from his country and develop something great. It’s amazing. Everybody is talking about the food. And also the service.”

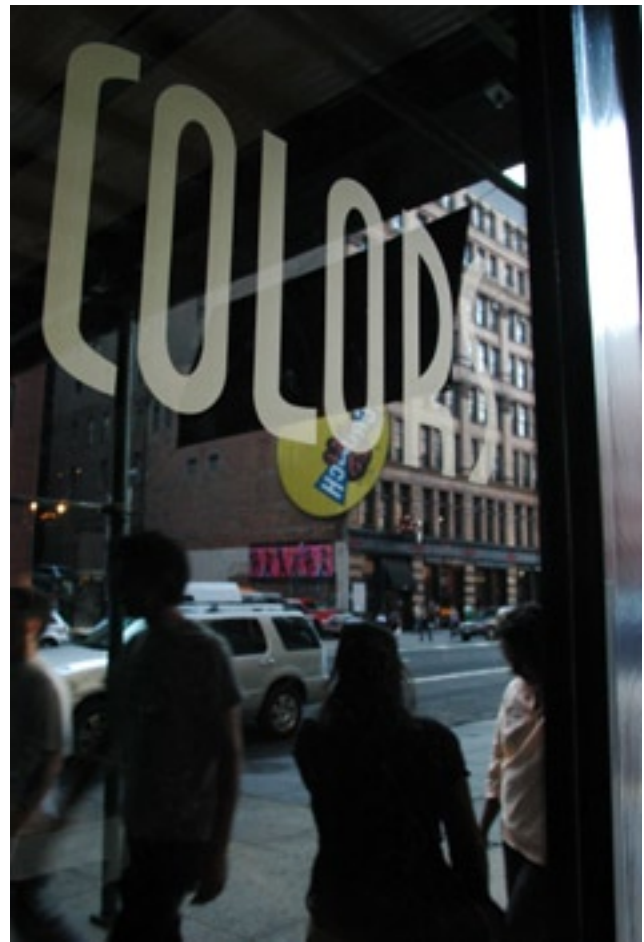
Stefan Mailvaganam says even the sleek 1930s decor design of the restaurant and map-covered walls have a message. “From a perspective of American history, it was a period of a lot of social reform, whether it is the New Deal, whether it was bringing in social safety nets for America, that is when a lot of things happened. So we are saying not only are we from everywhere else, but we also do celebrate the fact that America is a land of immigrants. We have maps everywhere.”

Mailvaganam says getting \$2 million of financing for a business that is worker-owned was not easy, especially when the workers are immigrants.

“We are here to prove we can do this. We are here to prove that there is another way of doing it and that working as a team is often better than working as an individual. We already have experienced growing pains with staff about that. But it is going to take the majority of people believing in the vision of this restaurant to make it succeed.”

Colors received major support from the Restaurant Opportunity Center, an advocacy group for employee welfare.

The group’s director, Saru Jayaraman, says Colors will set a new industry standard for the restaurant business. “The primary purpose of our organization is to fight to improve working conditions for all restaurant workers in New York City, all 165,000 of them. And we are using this as one tool of many to improve working conditions by creating a model of a different way of doing things. Good wages. Good working conditions.”



Photograph by Barry Fitzgerald

Colors restaurant is located in the heart of Greenwich Village, next to New York City’s historic Public Theater.

One of the big challenges for the workers is getting used to being owners, even if they are dishwashers or busboys.

Mamdouh adds, "Most of the things you see here—the design, choosing the chef, choosing the table, choosing how the bar is going to be, how this glass is going to be, it was all the democratic way. We have to get used to the idea that each one of us is the owner of this \$2-million restaurant."

Initial reviews have been good. Still the competition is fierce and Mailvaganam knows a great deal is at stake. "I suppose we have on the down side the fact that so many restaurants fail. But frankly the stakes are much higher. The ambitions and the mission of this restaurant are fairly noble. So we do want to make it succeed."

Barbara Schoetzwau, Voice of America, 15 March 2006

Starting Over: Since September 11, One Faces Challenge, Another Seeks Change

Tragedy not only propels us to change, it often drives us to take risks we haven't dared before. That surely has been the experience of hundreds of survivors of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Along with grieving for loved ones and making enormous adjustments in their personal lives, many have changed careers.

For **William M. Brown III**, formerly a project manager and architectural construction inspector at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, September 11 was a day of loss and a new beginning. Thirty-five of his colleagues, including 16 from his department on the 88th floor of the World Trade Center, were killed in the attacks.

Brown, 48 years old, wasn't at his desk only because he had taken his 13-year-old son to school that day and was late to work. He was on a ferry to Lower Manhattan when he saw the second plane hit the tower. "I knew it was a terrorist attack, and I knew my floor had been hit," he says.

For months, Brown had been thinking about leaving his job to launch his own architecture firm. In his 30s, he had worked in an architecture firm founded by his father, but the business dissolved after his father died in 1993. "I kept the dream of having my own firm," he says, "but I

was on the fence, debating whether I had enough money and could do it. The attacks pushed me over the fence to get started. I thought, "You only live once; you don't get a second chance, follow your passions," Brown says.

He set up an office in his home in Verona, N.J., and told architect friends that he was looking for projects. He also relied on the contacts he has as president of the American Institute of Architects in New Jersey. "I've been blessed because I know people throughout the state and haven't had to do heavy marketing to get jobs," he says.

Among his current projects: expanding a church in South Orange, N.J., renovating classroom space in a Newark church, and designing an addition to a home.

Had he stayed at the Port Authority he probably would have had to switch departments, but would have kept his \$75,000 yearly salary. He hasn't matched those earnings yet.

The attacks heightened his wish to do meaningful work. "It became very important to me to use architecture to make communities more livable for families, and especially for lower-income and disadvantaged residents," Brown says.

Since launching his own firm, he has become active in Rebuilding Together, a group that uses volunteers to renovate city homes for those in need. "I'm one voice, but I want to do my part," he says.

Meanwhile he is still in touch with former colleagues and plans to see some of them for the anniversary. But he'll also reserve part of the day. "I'm going to get up early and go to church and pray for my friends who lost their lives and their families—and also be thankful for the day," he says.

Erodothe Jacques had few of the choices or professional advantages Brown relied on when making a career change. A Haitian immigrant, he had worked in the restaurant business since coming to New York in 1981. He was a manager at Bouley Bakery and a waiter at Danube in Tribeca, a few blocks north of Ground Zero.

Outgoing and personable, he knew his customers and neighborhood residents on a first-name basis and never intended to change jobs. But Danube, along with other businesses in Tribeca, was shuttered for months after the attacks, and Jacques wasn't rehired when the restaurant finally reopened. "They only served dinner at first, and there wasn't a place for me," he says.

He looked for work at many other restaurants throughout the city, but no one was hiring. To stay afloat

and support his wife and four children, three of whom are in college, he relied on unemployment insurance and relief money from the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and other charities. But as the months wore on, he grew more anxious.

This summer, Jacques, 52, concluded that he had to broaden his job search. He learned about a six-month course in medical billing and office technology, and received government aid for tuition. "My fingers are stiff and I'm a terrible typist, not fast like some younger classmates," he jokes.

But he is determined to end up with a good hospital job. "I believe that always there can be a new beginning," he says. ■

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