

BUSINESS & TECH

With Community-Minded Hiring, SA Restaurateur Sohocki Helps Put Hope in Reach



NICHOLAS FRANK

DECEMBER 24, 2019



COURTESY /

Michael Sohocki owns and runs multiple restaurants in San Antonio.

UPDATED DECEMBER 25, 2019

The terms “locally sourced” and “sustainable” signal a growing trend among San Antonio restaurants, generally referring to the food that fills their menus. But Chef Michael Sohocki goes beyond the menu, to fostering a community-minded sense of sustainability that includes employee sourcing.

Sohocki annually hires dozens of employees from the [Haven for Hope](https://www.havenforhope.org/) (<https://www.havenforhope.org/>) homeless services center to staff his restaurants, which include [Restaurant Gwendolyn](https://www.restaurantgwendolyn.com/) (<https://www.restaurantgwendolyn.com/>) and [Kimura](https://www.kimurasa.com/) (<https://www.kimurasa.com/>), downtown and [Il Forno](https://www.ilfornos.com/) (<https://www.ilfornos.com/>), in Southtown. The Gwendolyn Group, which Sohocki runs, is also registered with the [Texas Workforce Commission](https://www.twc.texas.gov/) (<https://www.twc.texas.gov/>) and [Goodwill San Antonio Veterans Career Services](https://www.goodwillsa.org/services/vetcenter/) (<https://www.goodwillsa.org/services/vetcenter/>), though he’s found Haven for Hope to be a more consistently successful source of workers.

“While I would enjoy the credit for altruism, it’s not as simple as it sounds,” Sohocki wrote in an email. “It is not from high-mindedness but a simple admission that we are OF the people that brings us to our position on hiring.”

Of the relationship between local food sourcing and sustainability practices, and hiring from the pool of San Antonio's population in poverty, he said, "Of course they are related. The purpose of buying local ingredients is not dietary but socioeconomic in nature. I want to keep my money with my people. This extends to staffing as well."

The experienced chef believes the talent pool at Haven for Hope to be equal or better to the hospitality professionals who also apply for his available jobs. "I have found that highly qualified candidates for jobs that I require often have a skewed expectation of where their qualities will carry them," he wrote.

He acknowledges that the failure rate among former Haven residents is high. "Investing time, money and effort into raw human materials is very energy- and emotion-intensive work, and often results in failure."

Kenneth Wilson, Haven for Hope president and CEO, said residents face great challenges before and after their time at the center, which averages five to six months. "For a number of years, we have practiced what is called 'trauma informed care,'" he said, with many residents having experienced some form of abuse, addiction, mental health crisis, and homelessness before seeking assistance.

Still, Wilson is greatly heartened by the successes of former Haven residents. "If I'm at a restaurant or anywhere in the community, and I hear somebody say, 'Mr. Wilson! Hey, can I talk to you a minute?' And they say, 'I lived at Haven for Hope, and now I'm working,'" Wilson said of a typical encounter with a former resident. "And it happens often," he said.

Related: [San Antonio to Reevaluate How It Fights Homelessness](https://therivardreport.com/san-antonio-to-reevaluate-how-it-fights-homelessness/) (<https://therivardreport.com/san-antonio-to-reevaluate-how-it-fights-homelessness/>).

Steve Dane, manager of financial sustainability, backs up Wilson's assertion with statistics. Since Haven for Hope opened in 2010, Dane said, 3,000 former residents have found jobs. Among other career services, "we're trying to make sure that people don't undersell themselves," Dane said. "We help people understand what their skills are and and try to increase their [potential] earnings," he said.

Job fairs and direct contact with area employers that Haven facilitates give residents regular chances to apply for jobs.

The frequent failure rate Sohocki mentioned among former employees who went through Haven programs is due to a variety of reasons, he said. "I'd love to tell you that they walk in the door and they are magically healed and go straight into a better life – but this is no place for fairytales," he said of his restaurants, which require hard work and demanding schedules.

The food service industry can be notoriously rough on its employees, [ranking third](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1959/ShortReport-1959.html) (https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/report_1959/ShortReport-1959.html) among industry categories for substance use disorder by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

To confront the problem, the [Saint City Culinary Foundation](https://www.saintcityculinary.org/) (<https://www.saintcityculinary.org/>) runs the [HEARD program](https://therivardreport.com/san-antonio-support-group-for-food-industry-professionals-expands-to-austin/) (<https://therivardreport.com/san-antonio-support-group-for-food-industry-professionals-expands-to-austin/>), which focuses on addiction recovery, sobriety support, and mental health support among the many food service workers in San Antonio's thriving hospitality industry.

Homeless residents who found their way to Haven for Hope through problems caused by addiction face additional challenges once they find food service jobs, Sohocki said.

"Most people who power my industry ... have lived on the darker side of life, that is, we are fraught with alcoholism and illegitimate children and drugs and incarceration and a thousand other wrong turns. ... We live hard lives. These are the cards we are dealt. You will find my staff full of scars – including me."

Yet some of those employees have gone on to have productive and enduring careers in the service and hospitality industries. "We struggle and we sweat and bleed with them. I am always looking for a dependable vessel to contain what knowledge I can pass on," Sohocki wrote.

Former Haven for Hope resident Nathan Cunningham has been the dishwasher at Restaurant Gwendolyn for four years. Though he had successfully transitioned from the center to school, an internship, and independent living, he found himself desperately in need of work. After applying at local fast food restaurants without success, a friend recommended him to Sohocki. Cunningham was hired on the spot, without even the usual application process.

"That's just the type of person [Sohocki] is. He wants to believe in anyone," Cunningham said. "So if you come up and say, 'I'm willing to do the work,' then he'll give you a chance."



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

Nathan Cunningham has worked at Restaurant Gwendolyn since 2015.

Despite previous experience as a dishwasher, Cunningham found working for the dedicated Sohocki to be demanding.

"He has such high expectations, even for dishwasher," Cunningham said. "I was there for six months before I really felt comfortable having this job."

Still, he enjoys the challenge of helping the operation run smoothly, and feels comfortable and accepted by his staff colleagues.

Cunningham's path to Haven for Hope involved childhood abuse, a deteriorating family financial situation, and homelessness. He and his mother entered Haven at the same time, with Cunningham spending two years as a resident. He took advantage of job training programs and other resources, and benefited from some extra help as he started out and rented his first apartment.

His path is detailed in his self-published autobiography *Everything is ImPossible* (https://www.amazon.com/Everything-Impossible-Nathan-Lyle-Cunningham/dp/0578570874/ref=sr_1_fkmr1_2?keywords=nathan+pyle+cunningham&qid=1577320936&s=books&sr=1-2-fkmr1), which Sohocki, also a [writer](https://therivardreport.com/author/michael-sohocki/) (<https://therivardreport.com/author/michael-sohocki/>), helped him finish.

Sohocki's commitment to the possibilities he sees in such employees as Cunningham, and even those who don't find success in his restaurants, is evident in his poetic language describing the difficulties they face: "Sadly many have gone too far before I met them, have been raked across the rocks of life too much, their trust and faith are too damaged, and the vessel is cracked, and I can't get them back. They burn up. They break off."

Nevertheless, Sohocki maintains hope for continued successes.

“But in the ones in that in-between space, the reachable ones, I find a glitter of hope and human endeavor that is so worth pursuing, if one is willing to dig for it.”
