

GLOBAL DIVERSITY NEWS

Diversity News from around the globe



Interview #2: Gerry Fernandez of Multicultural Foodservice and Hospitality Alliance

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POST BODY

Gerry Fernandez is the energetic President and Founder of Multicultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance (or MFHA for short). MFHA is a *non-profit organization that promotes cultural intelligence in the workplace.*

It's always a bit difficult to explain exactly what advocacy groups specifically do, but think of Gerry and MFHA as a team of educators pushing for the advancement of diversity and cultural intelligence within the Foodservice & Hospitality industry.

They supply an in depth business case for expanding opportunities to under represented people (including women, minorities, LGBT community, younger employees, disabled, veterans, and more).

Check out the interview below as we discuss the workings of the largest private sector employer in the United States and learn how MFHA is leading the diversity charge.

To check out the MFHA website, [CLICK HERE](#),

1) Can you give readers a brief summary of the Foodservice and Hospitality industry? How does MFHA work within those industries and what is your organization's main focus?

The Foodservice & Hospitality industry is the largest private-sector employer in America, accounting for nearly 15 million jobs. There are more than a million restaurant locations in the country and roughly ten percent of all Americans work in restaurants.

Contrary to some widely-shared opinions, Foodservice & Hospitality offer great opportunities for advancement. Rather than being a dead end, most restaurant jobs give ambitious and hard working people a chance to move from the dish room to the board room. People who are interested in making a career in hospitality and Foodservice can rise to very attractive, well-paying jobs in a fairly short time if they are dedicated to their careers. About 4 in 5 restaurant owners began their careers in entry-level hospitality jobs.

More than half of all Americans get their first jobs in our industry. These are often young people, students, or others seeking part-time work. Our industry plays an important role as new workers develop habits that include; working hard, following directions, punctuality, and dependability.

2) Tell us about a few of your corporate members and how they support the organization.

Our members include some of the largest, most successful, and respected brands in the world. It is difficult to single out any of our members, because they are all important, but to give a sense of the companies we connect with, our corporate member makeup includes; Coca-Cola, Cracker Barrel, Darden, Ecolab, General Mills, , Golden Corral, McDonald's, PepsiCo, Sodexo and Yum! Brands.

These companies stand out for two reasons. First is their successful positioning and well known industry brands. These are some of the best-known brands in the business. The second is in their understanding of how our country is evolving. The United States is becoming increasingly multicultural, and these companies are growing profits by developing strategies that promote diversity & inclusion in their workforce and among their customers.

Any business that does not understand the way our nation is changing is likely to lose out on sales and employee retention. The companies that have played a leadership role in MFHA not only have a high degree of Cultural Intelligence, but they also dedicate substantial resources to promote and build business strategies around it. These companies are leaders and offer a tremendous amount of support while providing industry “best practices” that we emulate, share and promote.

3) Franchising is a big part of the Food service industry. How does MFHA help increase the amount of franchising opportunities among diverse individuals?

We are the leading organization in promoting opportunities to multicultural employees, millennials, and many others who may be unemployed or underemployed. As our industry is increasingly dominated by franchising, we work with at risk youth, people of color, urban populations, and others who may not see a lot of opportunity in their communities. There are employment and growth options within franchising. We educate people in understanding and embracing those opportunities.

Unfortunately, franchising has recently come under attack on a number of fronts, with criticisms missing the bigger point of how much opportunity the industry provides. There are literally thousands of business owners who started off in low level jobs (servers, pizza delivery people, dish washers, etc.), and rose up through the ranks to buy their own franchise business. It doesn't happen without hard work, and it isn't for everyone, but someone who wants to work hard and make a career out of the restaurant industry can find tremendous opportunities in franchising. Moving forward, we believe franchisers and franchisees will be an important part of our membership.

4) A really cool part of your website is “The Evolution of MFHA”. Can you talk about this a bit further?

The Evolution of MFHA outlines the story of the organization itself and also parallels our efforts to promote opportunities for people of color and other diverse groups.

When we were founded in 1996, it was not a certainty that we would succeed. There were a small number of people who came together to make it happen, and many of them were at General Mills, where I worked at the time. These industry leaders were generous with their time and resources, and were instrumental in getting MFHA off the ground. It is hard to believe that it has been twenty years and we are still the acknowledged leader in making the business case for diversity and inclusion in the Foodservice & Hospitality industry.

Over the years, MFHA has evolved its mission from being an advocate for Diversity & Inclusion to pursuing an even broader goal of building Cultural Intelligence. Cultural Intelligence encompasses the values of Diversity & Inclusion and it remains a central objective. Cultural Intelligence represents a broader understanding, acceptance, and even celebration of the changes our nation is going through demographically. Enhanced Cultural Intelligence also benefits our communities as well as the companies, workers, and suppliers who call them home.

5) Who is Gerry Fernandez? Can you tell us your history within the industry and what you're hoping to achieve on a personal level and for MFHA?

I am literally an example of a person who rose from the dish room to the board room. My first job was in the restaurant industry, on Martha's Vineyard. There I developed a love for it very early on.

Like many others, my childhood and early adult years had some challenges. It was a good life, but not always an easy one. My family was not wealthy, but I was fortunate enough to have many good role models and people who cared about me to help when I veered off course.

I was raised in an environment that put a lot of emphasis on faith. I think having a relationship with God is very important and that one way we serve God is by serving each other. MFHA gives me a way to do that.

I was fortunate to help open the first Capital Grille, in Providence, CT. That concept has grown into one of the world's most successful steakhouse brands. Much of what I know about service and taking pride in your work is directly attributable to my tenure at Capital Grille and things I learned from Ned Grace.

It was while I was a manager at General Mills that MFHA was born. As the first leader of the organization, I've had a lot of support and encouragement from General Mills executives, and from a lot of other talented people. We've enjoyed much success and I am happy to say that we are celebrating our 20th anniversary this year.

6) Let's take a moment for a "deep dive". In your opinion what are some of the positives and negatives of the Foodservice and Hospitality industries?

Clearly one of the biggest challenges the industry faces is its image. Too many potential workers view it as a dead-end industry, while too many of our critics think the industry takes unfair advantage of employees. While no industry is perfect, we are unapologetic advocates for Foodservice & Hospitality and recognize the ways it contributes to an improved quality of life for our workers, business owners, customers and communities.

Looking ahead, it will be increasingly important for each of us to dedicate ourselves to ensuring that we are positive and constructive parts of our communities, beyond just being employers and providing a good product.

7) What do you want to see happen to help improve the Foodservice industry?

Well the obvious starting point is that we need to continue our commitment to Diversity & Inclusion. While we have made progress in the past two decades, much remains to be done. No one can deny that we still have a long way to go before people of color, Latinos, LGBT Americans, and others have equal access to the kinds of education, training, and encouragement that make success possible. If you look at communities where issues of racism have played a prominent role in recent months they are overwhelmingly places where economic equality, education, and crime are challenges. I believe that a strong Foodservice & Hospitality industry has a role to play in helping to bring communities together, and in helping to build cooperation and trust among disparate groups. At MFHA, our strategy has always been focused on improving opportunities for workers, companies, suppliers and communities. You can see example after example of businesses from our industry that have become prominent, positive influences in the communities where they live and work.

8) Lastly, where would you like the Foodservice and Hospitality industries to be in 10 years and how do we get there?

I can only imagine that our industry will grow both larger and more complex. If you look at restaurants today compared to 20 years ago, it is incredible how much things have changed. Quick-service, casual dining, and specialty dining have exploded, as has demand for sustainable menu items, healthful dining, and more. My expectation is that the industry will continue to evolve, diversify, and grow, and the result will be that it offers more opportunities than ever before. Most

importantly I want to see minority businesses thrive (especially with Blacks and Latinos). If minority businesses are healthy then minority communities will be healthy as well.