



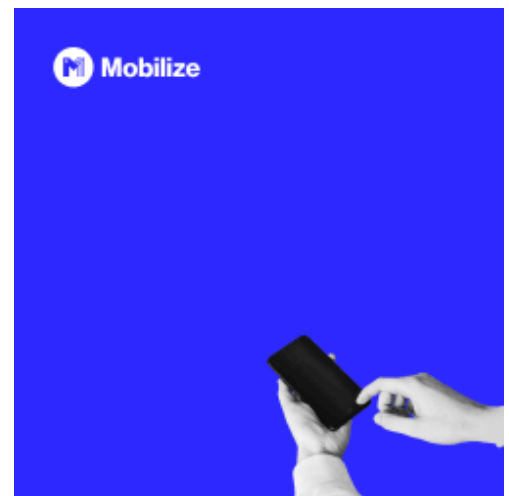
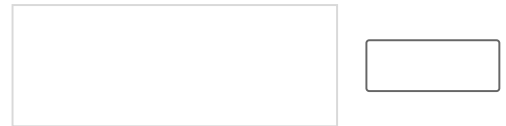
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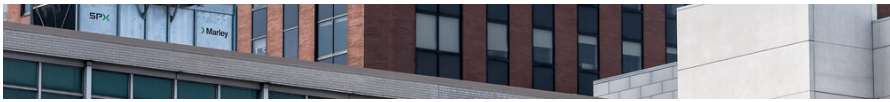


In Hard-Hit Newark, Businesses and Donors Fund Local Restaurants to Feed the Vulnerable

Liz Longley



Follow the Money!



AUDIBLE'S OFFICES IN DOWNTOWN NEWARK. AUDIBLE IS BACKING A PROGRAM TO FEED PEOPLE IN NEED AND SUPPORT LOCAL RESTAURANTS. [ANDRIY BLOKHIN](#)/SHUTTERSTOCK

As hard as it is to believe sometimes, the pandemic will end one day. What those silent city centers lined with shuttered storefronts will look like then hinges on decisions being made now by leaders who are innovative enough to survive a pandemic.

Newark, New Jersey, may have a checkered past, but it also has no shortage of savvy leaders working to see its restaurants through to the other side. Representatives from business, sports and government came together to support [Newark Working Kitchens](#), a sustainable, replicable giving model that's kept the lights on at dozens of the restaurants that give Newark its unique character, ranging from the Halal Guys, an offshoot of the famed food cart offering Middle Eastern fare, to health food hit Fresh Coast. With an initial boost of \$1.3 million from the audiobook and podcast platform Audible, the program has drawn millions in local funding.

Revitalization, Interrupted

Despite a rich history, a busy international airport, and the steady draw of arts and sports centers, Newark is stubbornly viewed through the lens of the [1967 riots](#), five days of violence fueled by years of poverty, racial discrimination, and civic disenfranchisement, among other factors. Unrest in the city left it hollowed out and disconnected from its middle class suburbs, but Newark has done some hard work since then to create

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the kind of place where families and companies want to hang their hats.

A case in point is the racial composition of the city's police force. While the relationship between the police and the community remains a work in progress, the force is now 42% Hispanic and 37% Black, more closely mirroring the [makeup](#) of city residents, at 39% and 47%, respectively.

Before the pandemic, an engine of urban revitalization was humming along. A decades-empty luxury department store dating back to 1901 was converted to living space, anchored by a Whole Foods. Low-income towers and townhouses rose in Georgia King Village. Military Park, the long dormant town square, sported a renovated fountain, new greenery, and programming to draw in visitors.

Businesses took note. Audible, led by founder and Executive Chairman Don Katz and owned by Amazon, opened its headquarters on Broad Street in 2007. Panasonic of North America opened offices by the riverfront in 2013. Rutgers expanded its Newark campus. Even city stalwart Prudential Financial, which was founded in Newark more than 140 years ago, expanded its headquarters with a new office tower.

Then the coronavirus started spreading. Rutgers students headed out for spring break and stayed there. Public school kids were sent home to learn virtually, and many workers began working from home.

Repurposing for a Purpose

Though Mayor Ras Baraka was quick to communicate the risks posed by the virus, Newark was especially hard-hit owing to its proximity to airports in two states, vulnerable populations of seniors and people of color, and a poverty rate that triples the national average. As in other cities across America, businesses were closed, pushing scores of workers into unemployment.

When the first stay-home order was issued in March, Aly Leifer, who along with her family has run the Cuban eatery La Cocina and Robert's Pizza in Newark for more than a dozen years, walked out the door thinking they'd be closed for maybe two weeks. Instead, it sidelined the employees they consider family until April, when they made their first move to reopen.

But being open didn't mean being in business. Leifer knew traffic peaked with the work week, and that the city grew quiet after 8:00 p.m. But the days were quiet now, too. The restaurant tried expanding its delivery range, thinking if someone orders, we'll get it there. But business stayed quiet.

Then along came Newark Working Kitchens (NWK), a free meal delivery service designed to sustain businesses and jobs while supporting Newark's most vulnerable populations. The program underwrites meals from beloved local restaurants for delivery to furloughed school kids, homebound seniors, the homeless, veterans, low-income families—and frontline medical responders.

Newark Working Kitchens

NWK launched in mid-April with \$1.5 million in seed money from Audible and support from celebrity chefs Marcus Samuelsson, a local business owner, and José Andrés, whose World Central Kitchen runs a similar [program](#) in cities across the country.

Though a number of efforts have popped up to support the restaurant industry and its [workers](#), Newark Working Kitchens went decidedly local, closing the circle between smarting businesses and the city's disenfranchised, and rallying support from all corners. By the end of August, NWK attracted donations totaling more than \$3 million from the City of Newark, the local energy company PSEG, corporate leaders like TD Bank, behavioral change platform Thrive Global, Fidelco Realty Group, and the Newark-based National Hockey League team the New Jersey Devils.

Josh Roberts, the Devils' president, says Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment co-founders Josh Harris and David Blitzer and the team were inspired by what they saw and contributed \$200,000 through the [Devils Care Foundation](#)—and launched a virtual fundraiser called “[Donate a Plate](#),” bringing its community of fans into play. Two thousand meals at 10 bucks a shot have already been committed, and players have championed the effort on their own social networks.

To date, 400,000 meals have been delivered to 10,000 Newark residents. And 200 jobs have been preserved, not counting the vendors supplying all that food. But it's the neighbors-feeding-neighbors model for which Leifer is especially grateful, calling the program a “lifesaver” that gives her team a sense of purpose.

Leifer is also clear about what the future would look like without NWK, saying simply, “We would not be open.” Other participating restaurateurs echoed her sentiments. In a local news [interview](#), Sean McGovern, the third-generation owner of McGovern’s Tavern, said the program was “keeping the lights on, honestly. If we weren’t doing this, in terms of our bottom line, we’d be completely boarded up.”

When the Crisis Ends

No one knows what the world will look like when the crisis ends. But at least part of Newark’s pre-pandemic vibrancy is being preserved to help the city’s comeback.

Don Katz, the man behind moving Audible to Newark, says the effort will take continued support and diligence. “Even with partial resumption of indoor dining in the weeks ahead, the foot traffic around these restaurants will remain a fraction of pre-COVID levels as Newark’s major employers adopt gradual, phased return-to-work plans.” Katz shared the story of one NWK restaurant owner who reported having 140 live customers a day in March. When they spoke in mid-August, he’d had seven.

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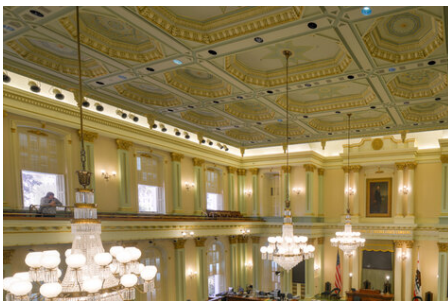
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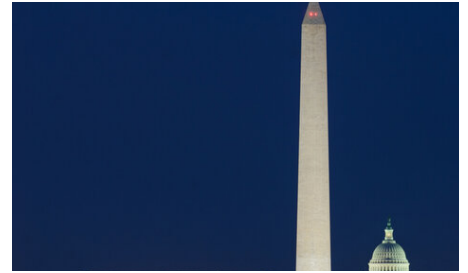
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