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News | One World Everybody Quits: Employee walkout at community café raises questions about ownership and nonprofit status.

By Eric S. Peterson
Posted 11/06/2008

Salt Lake City marked World Food Day for the first time Oct. 16 as Mayor Ralph Becker and the One World Everybody Eats nonprofit organization encouraged citizens to think of the city's hungry.

The day after Becker congratulated One World owner and founder Denise Cerreta for her community service, most of the One World staff walked off the job, citing lack of faith in Cerreta's leadership and concern that the nonprofit wasn't acting legally.

One World patrons, who pick their portion sizes and pay whatever they think their meals were worth through donations, have been charmed by the trust instilled upon them by the small café off South Temple and 300 East. But the 11 employees who walked away on Oct. 17, and the four workers fired shortly before, wonder why Cerreta never trusted them.

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"The One World vision is to feed the world, take care of the world, to trust people," says former employee Jessie Morton. "And not to have that trust extended to us is a huge breaking point."

The employee revolt came after Bo Dean, One World's manager of five years, was fired. With little explanation why and only Cerreta left calling the shots, staff members decided they'd had enough. One World has been touted as a model that dozens of other organizations hope to replicate across the country. Ex-employees hope the vision is carried on—but with all the right paperwork. While One World runs on donations, the nonprofit has for the past two years not filed for a state permit that would allow it to solicit donations from patrons.



The café initially ran as a business before switching to a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit in 2006. It has gained media attention and public praise for promoting sustainability, organic cuisine and for not wasting food.

"That everyone got to eat and to eat well meant a lot to me," Morton says. "To serve a hundred people at lunchtime and put my trust in each one of those people ... it was a life-changing lesson."

But things went seriously wrong for workers after general manager Bo Dean was fired. While Cerreta actually founded the nonprofit, it was Dean who handled day-to-day operations. He was highly respected by the staff. When One World paychecks began to bounce in recent months, employees say, Dean would not cash his checks so others could be paid. "He even paid my rent once," Morton says. Morton and Dean had heard one reason he was fired was for using drugs on the premises. The allegation, Morton says, is "completely insane."

Morton says that charge was extended to all of the former staff. Cerreta, she says, had referred to them as a "drug tribe" and had likewise berated other staff and volunteers as "circus freaks"—sometimes in front of customers—because of their body piercings.

"She's destroying relationships with this community," says former employee Lizzy Totterer. "The [community] that One World is supposed to be building up."

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Owner Cerreta denies making the comments and says the staff was unwilling to accept necessary structural changes. Cerreta says that while One World was sustainable previously, better structure would have helped to keep the employees' checks from bouncing.

"I remember that was a shock," Cerreta says of finding out that One World couldn't pay its employees. "We were like, 'Woah!'" She says she solved that problem by borrowing some cash and making subsequent layoffs. "I really needed to come in and basically save this place."

Cerreta declined to comment specifically on Dean's termination.

"After a lot of deliberation we, the board, decided to let go of our general manager, word leaked out a little prematurely and the crew just decided to walk out—it was what it was. I think everybody's direction needed to go another way."

Cerreta believes she's made the right decision. "Intuitively I knew [One World] could be improved, but because I didn't have the expertise, I didn't know how," she says. Since the layoffs and hiring a new chef, she believes One World can be a better model for other aspiring community kitchens.

Yet while One World has federal tax-exempt status, the organization has failed to give required 990 tax forms to the IRS. Neither has it registered with Utah Consumer Protection to get its required charitable solicitations permit, registration that ensures the nonprofit is accountable for how it spends collected donations. Soliciting donations without the permit could result in up to \$10,000 in fines.

One World treasurer Brian Meacham says he wasn't aware they needed the permit, citing ambiguity in the statute and the fact that he had not heard any complaints from Utah Consumer Protection. Since speaking with *City Weekly*, One World has decided to register with Utah Consumer Protection and filed for its permit.

"There's definitely strange things going on all over the place," says ex-manager Dean. While Dean says he was told that he was not accountable to the board of directors, he believes his management differences with Cerreta led to his termination. "It's supposed to be a board that runs the foundation, but it's pretty much a matriarchy," Dean says. "Whatever Denise says, goes."

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Looking back, Dean wishes there would have been better communication, like letting him know he was fired, instead of hearing it from other employees first. "It's a pretty crappy thing to do to a person who's worked for them for five years," Dean says. "Especially one who worked overtime every week and never got paid for it."

But for former employees, the vision may carry on. They are discussing starting their own nonprofit.

"It's important for people to know it can work," Morton says, as her former co-worker Totterer finishes her sentence. "Done right and done well, by people who know what's going on and who love and care."

COMMENTS (2)



By RJM 11-05-08

Interesting story. Sadly, it's not surprising that even the idealistic among us suffer the same human weaknesses as everyone else, including the tendency toward infighting and problems deciding who's in charge / how to run things.

By John 11-06-08

It's hard to be charitable in today's world. Any time you do something good there's always a government rule or regulation to comply with. If this had been a for profit business they would have been brought up on charges and closed down. As long as we deal with people, for or not for profit, we will always have problems, it's the nature of things. Still we should remember "Service Above Self"

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