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A Hyphenated-American Dream

By ANTHONY DePALMA

A truly great city inspires truly great dreams, even during the days when all else seems lost.

There was no bleaker time in New York's history than 9/11. Yet it was then, with the restaurant where he had worked for six years - Windows on the World - in splinters and 73 of his fellow employees gone, that Silverio Moog's dream started to take shape.

Now Mr. Moog, a spunky 41-year-old bartender from the Philippines, can hardly believe what is about to happen. Next week he'll go to work in a brand-new restaurant, and start a totally new life.

Restaurants open in New York all the time, but there has never been one like this. Mr. Moog and 50 other waiters, busboys, bartenders and dishwashers, many of them immigrants who worked at Windows, have formed a cooperative that will run one of the city's first worker-owned restaurants.

Each one of them will claim a piece of the restaurant, called Colors, as their own and share in any profits. Each one submitted a family recipe to help shape the restaurant's eclectic menu - which they describe as American fare with a global twist. And each one has pinned lifelong dreams on an idea formed in the crucible of disaster.

"This is one of my American dreams, to be an owner of a business being run by immigrants who have a common goal," Mr. Moog said.

The possibilities and opportunities are wondrous, he said, and he is especially proud to see his Philippine Lobster Lumpia - lobster and minted sweet potato spring rolls - on the Colors menu.

But the reality of what he and the other workers are undertaking is daunting as well.

"I guess I'm a little bit scared," he said.

And no wonder. With the failure rate of restaurants - 60 percent after three years according to a recent Ohio State University study - and all the vagaries of location, perception and the economy to deal with, even experienced, well-financed restaurateurs can stumble.

While the co-op members have centuries of restaurant experience among them, they have never owned a business. So they brought in a professional, Stefan Mailvaganam, a Canadian citizen of Sri Lankan descent, to be general manager.

Mr. Mailvaganam realizes this is no ordinary job. "What we are trying to do here is start a restaurant with a conscience," he told two dozen co-op members who gathered last week for a final training session. While he spoke, spacklers and carpenters rushed to complete their work. The restaurant, in Lower Manhattan a few doors down from the Public Theater, is scheduled to open for dinner on Tuesday. "It's challenging," Mr. Mailvaganam said over the din of steel and wood, "but we are committed to doing it."

Rarely has one project had to carry so many expectations. Besides memorializing the 73 who died in Windows, which was atop 1 World Trade Center, the co-op is trying to do no less than change an industry.

Nobody in the restaurant, not even the dishwashers, will receive less than \$13.50 an hour, far higher than average restaurant wages. They will share tips and be eligible to receive overtime and vacations. Eventually they will be covered by health insurance and have pensions.

And, of course, each will share in the profits of the restaurant, if and when there are profits.

"I am doing this for myself, for the workers who died and for all restaurant workers in the city," said Awal Ahmed, 43, a waiter from Bangladesh who worked at Windows for 17 years. "It doesn't matter to me how much profit I get. It's like having a piece of my own restaurant."

The Sept. 11 attack forced many people to change their outlook on life. Surviving workers from Windows realized that nothing more than a simple matter of scheduling had determined who lived and who died.

Many of the surviving workers were left scrambling for work. A cooperative restaurant was seen as a way of providing jobs as well as making a strong point about workers' rights. Money had to be raised, but traditional lenders balked, even after an Italian food cooperative put up \$500,000 to support the project.

Saru Jayaraman, executive director of the Restaurant Opportunities Center, which gets support from the restaurant workers union, said she thought workers would be eligible to receive the 9/11 financing available for rebuilding Lower Manhattan. But except for wage subsidies from Catholic Charities, they have not received any of that financial help.

The project has a budget of \$2.2 million, which the co-op finally raised from more than 20 sources. Each worker contributed at least 100 hours of sweat equity.

The decision to open an expensive, 120-seat tablecloth restaurant in a good location, rather than a humbler place that would have cost much less, and opened a lot sooner, turned into a heated dispute that led several co-op members to leave.

Others left because the legal framework for the co-op was structured so that members' early profits go to pay back the Italian co-op.

Some are still unhappy with how profits are to be shared. "Our percentage keeps going down and down," said Khondoker Delwar, 43, a waiter from Bangladesh. But he's sticking with the project, he said, because it means his young daughter will know he was part of something noble that happened in New York.

A successful co-operatively owned restaurant could become a powerful symbol. Juan Galan, an organizer with Local 100 of Unite Here, which represents hotel and restaurant workers, is trying to persuade co-op members to join the union because it would show owners how treating workers well can actually help increase profits.

And the co-op members are joining the New York State Restaurant Association, an owners' lobby. At a recent co-op meeting, Rajani Adhikary, a policy organizer for the Restaurant Opportunities Center, a labor advocacy group that has been instrumental in forming the co-op, told members that by joining the association they would be helping all restaurant workers. "You're going to be like spies," Ms. Adhikary told them, "and tell us what they do so we will know more about them."

E. Charles Hunt, executive vice president of the restaurant association, said the co-op members were welcome. "We're on their side," Mr. Hunt said. "We just don't see why they would feel they need to have spies amid our ranks."

Most of the co-op members found other jobs while waiting for Colors to open. Magdi Labib, an Egyptian immigrant and a natural leader of the co-op, is doing well as a waiter at an expensive Midtown steakhouse. He said he would probably earn less at Colors, but he will make the switch anyway. "I know that 6 out of 10 restaurants fail, but it's not going to happen here," said Mr. Labib, 51. "Everyone is going to know how to do their job in a proficient way, and that's going to help."

The workers had planned to bring memorabilia from Windows to the new restaurant but abandoned that idea because they felt the constant reminder of what happened there would be too depressing. q

The new restaurant will feature 1930's decor because the workers feel that era represented the height of labor power in New York. The name Colors reflects the 22 nations from which the members come, as will be shown on a giant mural in the restaurant.

These veteran restaurant workers realize that the emotional link to 9/11 will bring in diners, but it will become secondary to the things that really determine a restaurant's success - service and food.

"Yes we have 9/11 and people who believe in workers' rights might come at first," said Fekkak Mamdouh, a former Windows waiter who now is assistant director of the Restaurant Opportunities Center, "but if you don't give good service and good food, they won't come back."

Mr. Mamdouh said that if Colors fails, it will be a failure for all immigrants in the city. But if it succeeds, he said "it will be a victory for all restaurant workers in New York, all immigrants and all people who believe in workers' rights."