

CHEFS AND RESTAURANTS [THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021 ISSUE \(/MAGAZINEFRONT/1396576\)](#)

How Disability Taught Eli Kulp Resiliency

by Jacqueline Raposo — JANUARY 25, 2021 8:12AM



Eli Kulp PHOTO: NEAL SANTOS

When you work in hospitality, not being able to go to restaurants is an absence that cuts particularly deep. “It's one of the worst feelings you can have—that you literally can't go somewhere,” says **Eli Kulp**, culinary director and co-founder of **High Street Hospitality Group** out of Philadelphia.

Many chefs have mourned this loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, but Kulp's referring to other accessibility issues entirely: On May 12, 2015, he was commuting on an Amtrak train between Philadelphia and New York when it derailed at high speed. His body slammed into a luggage rack, paralyzing him. Quadriplegic, a large motorized wheelchair now provides him independent movement—but not into everywhere he wants to go.

“You thought you did enough research, but now you're there and can't get in,” he explains. “Or the doors are not wide enough. Or the tables aren't configured in a way that makes you physically able to navigate. Or the bathrooms might be a flight up or a flight down.”

Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act that was signed into law in 1990, many older buildings are still not accessible. Kulp's restaurants are, coincidentally, accessible enough that he can enter them. But he can't easefully navigate their kitchens or dining rooms. “That was a little tough for me to get used to,” he says. A portable ramp gets him over two steps where needed, and he communicates his accommodation needs in advance. But when facing a staircase or narrow entryway?

“Without a doubt, not being able to physically access a space...it feels wrong,” he says.



Eli Kulp and his team at Fork in Philadelphia PHOTO: NEAL SANTOS

The value of social space is a topic Kulp explores on *The Chef Radio* podcast, which he launched last April. While discussing closures, to-go menus, sidewalk dining, and reduced indoor capacity with industry friends, he's observed a universal understanding of how vital social space is to the industry. "If we don't have that social atmosphere, there's nothing," he says. But the industry has largely failed to connect the dots between this lack of access and what Kulp and other disabled people face on a regular basis.

Kulp didn't make the connection either until our conversation. "This is, in a sense, what people with disabilities go through," he says of the pandemic wave of capacity limits and shutdowns. Bad weather shuts outdoor dining opportunities; in the same way, he stays in when rain or snow might damage his wheelchair. The excessive time able-bodied people spend navigating safe transportation to accessible social spaces is old hat for disabled people. The broadening of to-go menus for those sheltering at home would have long serviced people who can't ever access restaurants inaccessible to various physical and cognitive disabilities. And then there's the virus itself: Kulp's diaphragm isn't strong, so he's susceptible to respiratory illness, and catching even a cold is dangerous. Like many disabled people, this puts him at high risk for COVID. "You don't want to have to take more precautions," he says.

The parallels are clear. And although chefs don't seem to be considering disabled people's experiences in their discussions about social space, lessons that Kulp has learned can help chefs

navigate COVID challenges.



Eli Kulp PHOTO: NEAL SANTOS

Like many chefs, he worked in kitchens from a young age, and the accident took him away from his extremely hard-wired, able-bodied routines. His marriage dissolved in the aftermath as well. “The shame, the guilt, the frustration—all those things were constantly on top of me,” he remembers of the massive identity loss, not unlike what many out-of-work chefs now face.

“Chefs are control freaks by nature—you have to be. When you operate at a high level, your kitchen is your kingdom. That’s no longer there,” he points out. “They’re no longer in control of what that is.”

Rather than await a return to “normal,” Kulp accepted early on that his disability was permanent. “Your ‘new normal’ is something you hear a lot when you live with disability, but it’s not something you hear civilization talk about,” he says. While mourning the life he lost, he credits the same grit and resilience required to become a chef for helping him adapt and evolve. “I could still have a role within the sort of chef-ness of myself,” he says of reconsidering how he could still be an effective chef and mentor; new projects like the podcast stemmed from this process. That kind of thinking can help other chefs navigating their evolving “new normal” as they creatively modify service, shift or layer active rolls, and start new cottage businesses.

But Kulp recognizes not everyone has the privilege to even make such moves. And he hasn't observed any reason for unbridled optimism about the industry's return. Social inequity within hospitality is part of the same broken system that would have had him out of a job after his accident had he not had legal stake in his restaurant group. "I don't have any illusions that if I was just an executive chef somewhere, I would have had any of this," he notes.

He's learned from experience that it takes bravery and vulnerability to continually accept, adapt, and rely on social support during particularly trying times. And there were many things he had to get past emotionally before he could accept his new baseline as a disabled chef—like that he'd always be a little in the way in his kitchens, and that his chefs would have to feed him when he was critiquing dishes. "We've now experienced the fragility of our industry, and our passion, and our love," he says of COVID.

"But just like that grit, the resiliency, and the tenacity—you find a way."

Jacqueline Raposo is an immune-compromised, disabled writer based in New York City.

COMMENTS

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