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To: Kevin Boucher

Subject: Dream Forward Statement

On my podcast, *Corner Table Talk*, I recently spoke with celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson about the future of independent restaurants. I asked whether mom-and-pop businesses could still survive given today's challenges. His response was telling:

"Yes, but mom and pop need to become family now. Success in hospitality is no longer just about serving great food—it's also about reaching customers where they are. This shift has also created new opportunities for cultural and ethnic cuisine. Thanks to platforms like TikTok, niche and regional foods—like a Haitian family's home-cooked specialties—can now reach a wider audience than ever before."

The key is not just what you serve but how and where you connect with your customers. Those who embrace this evolution have the potential to thrive, keeping the entrepreneurial spirit alive and ensuring that independent restaurants remain an integral part of the American economy. Older operators must embrace technology, and for younger folks entering the workforce, recognizing opportunities through tech and social media is essential.

In hospitality, we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that economic growth is inclusive, creating opportunities for those who have historically been left behind. True progress is not just about what is fair—it is about building a future where businesses, communities, and individuals thrive together.

Restaurants are more than places to eat; they are gathering spaces that foster connection, preserve traditions, and celebrate cultural diversity. They serve as vital economic engines, especially for immigrant and minority entrepreneurs, yet many small businesses struggle to compete with larger corporations that offer higher wages, health benefits, and greater job security.

Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign aimed to secure economic opportunities for all. He believed that "the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice." To achieve truly inclusive economic growth, we must invest in policies and programs that level the playing field, such as access to affordable capital, workforce training, mentorship initiatives, and equitable wage

structures. Supporting small businesses doesn't just strengthen local economies; it preserves the cultural richness and unique character of our communities. By creating an environment where independent businesses can thrive, we build a more dynamic, diverse, and sustainable future for everyone.

As a 40-year veteran of the hospitality industry, and in particular, owner/operator of many independently owned restaurants, I have seen firsthand how economic inclusion can transform not just businesses but individuals and lead the way for entire communities like Harlem, South Los Angeles, and Hollywood

Hospitality has a unique position: it is one of the largest employers of diverse, often underserved populations. Yet, leadership and ownership remain overwhelmingly homogeneous. Economic growth happens when those who have historically been left out get a seat at the table — not just as employees but as decision-makers, owners, and innovators. Restaurant floors may be diverse, but too often, the ownership table is not. Changing that isn't just a moral imperative — it's an economic one. Diverse businesses and leadership lead to stronger, more resilient companies that better reflect and serve their communities. I can attest to the struggles and the benefits of the journey.

Practical strategies, grounded in my personal experience include:

- **Creating Pathways to Ownership:** Creating programs inclusive of business training, fiscal responsibility, mentorship, investment opportunities, and partnerships that help employees, especially people of color, move from working in restaurants to owning them.
 - Calling on larger operating groups to invest in, mentor, and look for opportunities to scale smaller operators.
 - Host meet-and-greet sessions with professional athletes and other high-net-worth individuals who have an interest in hospitality to offer guidance in real estate acquisition and funding startups. Connect high-net-worth individuals with operators that could scale with proper backing.
- **Leadership Development:** Establishing leadership pipelines that nurture talent from within, ensuring people from diverse backgrounds can grow into management and ownership roles along with team building skills.
- **Policy and Institutional Support:** Advocating for access to capital and fair lending are critical to supporting small, diverse businesses.
- **Creating a Career Option:** Educating and incentivizing graduating high school seniors to consider majoring in hospitality programs in college and/or attending culinary school.

I have witnessed how each role within a restaurant, from the dishwasher to the general manager, plays a vital part in the success of the whole. This view provides an accurate microcosm for our society: *A rising tide lifts all boats*. When we take care of the least fortunate among us, respect and invest in low-wage workers, train and support their growth, and empower the entrepreneurs whose ambitions fuel our economy, we strengthen our nation as a whole.

Dr. King once said, "All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence."