

## BLOG POST

### Reflections on the start of my World Central Kitchen Journey

By: Matthew Tognarelli

In January of 2019, during the US government shutdown, I came across a social media post from World Central Kitchen calling for volunteers. Motivated to help, I signed up and showed up the very next day, not knowing what to expect but eager to make a difference. My first encounter was with Emma Haberman, the volunteer coordinator—a kind and stable presence who, after a quick assessment, asked if I'd be willing to lend a hand on the loading dock. Having spent years doing landscaping and other manual labor in my 20s before I started in marketing, the prospect didn't faze me. At the end of that first shift, I made a point to thank Emma for the opportunity and mentioned that I'd tried to sign up again, only to find all the slots filled. She encouraged me to return anyway, an invitation I gratefully accepted.

As I settled into my new routine at World Central Kitchen, I quickly became acquainted with a cast of unforgettable characters. Each day brought new friendships and a growing sense of community, even though I'd never before set foot in a professional kitchen. My learning curve was steep, but I found guidance in unexpected places.

One of my earliest mentors was Wolfi Baermann, a fellow volunteer whose German accent and stocky build made him easy to spot. He navigated the narrow, bustling kitchen with practiced ease, and I soon realized he had a wealth of experience in restaurant operations. Wolfi generously shared his wisdom, showing me how to move efficiently through the cramped space, calling "BEHIND" as I passed by chefs with a 50-pound bag of onions, or shouting "CORNER" as I rounded tight turns with a cooler full of Chef Adler's signature pasta Bolognese. His calm presence and practical advice helped me quickly adapt to the kitchen's rhythm.

In those early days, I also met Kim Stemple, a vibrant and spunky woman whose energy and positivity seemed boundless. With her spikey short blonde hair and infectious smile, Kim instantly became the heart of our volunteer group. Despite her ongoing battle with terminal cancer, she never missed a beat, juggling chemo treatments with daily runs and still managing to outpace us all at work. Kim's tenacity and warmth brought us together and kept our spirits high. Though cancer ultimately took her from us, her memory remains vivid; whenever I see a unicorn or rainbow, I think of Kim and her remarkable spirit.

As our work grew, so did our team. While we served hot meals to government employees working without pay, we also set up a makeshift grocery store in the adjoining dining room. That side of the operation was led by Zomi Frankcom, a dynamic Australian whose charm and leadership made her instantly memorable. Every morning, once the kitchen was stocked, Zomi would greet us with a cheerful “Hey mates!” and enlist our help moving hefty 50-pound bags of onions, potatoes, and carrots through long corridors. She always pitched in at the start, but like any good leader, she knew when to step back and let the team handle the load. Zomi’s energy and encouragement were vital in keeping us moving and motivated.

With time, the kitchen’s leadership changed as well. When Chef Adler returned to his regular job, Chef Mollie Kaufmann stepped in to lead. Her no-nonsense style and deep knowledge made the transition seamless, and she quickly came to trust me, Wolfi, and Kim, now the core of our warehouse crew, to keep the kitchen running smoothly. Chef Mollie eventually brought me into the World Central Kitchen family full-time in April 2020, a turning point in my journey that shaped the years to come.

So many others became part of this extended family. Lisa, affectionately dubbed the “soup queen,” impressed everyone with her culinary skills, though she actually worked in marketing and communications. Her soups were legendary, and she later became the internal communications director as the organization expanded.

Throughout 2019, I stayed closely connected to many of my World Central Kitchen colleagues, especially as Kim’s fight with cancer kept us in touch. When Hurricane Dorian hit Abaco, most of the team deployed to help with relief efforts, though I couldn’t join due to other commitments. Even from afar, I supported them by helping in the office with logistics and communications. Many staff members who joined during that period became key players in the organization’s growth.

In April 2020, just as the world began shutting down due to COVID-19, I received a call from Chef Mollie. She asked if I would run procurement and logistics for World Central Kitchen’s DC response. After discussing the commitment with my wife and receiving her unreserved support, I agreed. The next morning, I started a new chapter—one that would profoundly shape my path for the next six years.