

74-Year-Old Omaha Restaurateur Helps Revitalize Struggling Neighborhood

[Huffington Post July 17, 2016](#)

Big Mama's Kitchen and Catering in Omaha, Nebraska is a destination for out-of-town foodies and local restaurant aficionados alike. The restaurant has been featured on the Food Network, the Travel Channel, and praised by celebrity chef, Guy Fieri.

For restaurateur Patricia Barron — better known as “Big Mama” — the soul food eatery is the culmination of a lifetime of cooking, collecting recipes, and honing her business skills. Next year she'll move from her present, hard-to-find location to the Highlander neighborhood, a mixed income community with upscale amenities located in the heart of North Omaha. It's a historically African-American neighborhood, which has experienced high levels of poverty and violence in recent decades. However, entrepreneurs such as Barron and organizations like Seventy-Five North Revitalization Corp., the nonprofit developing the Highlander, are working to change that.

“I'm just excited about this project,” said Barron. “I'm glad to be a part of that project and bring my restaurant there and serve the food that we serve here.”

The restaurant will be housed in a mixed-use facility called the Community Accelerator which will anchor the 40-acre Highlander development. The 65,000 square foot Accelerator building has been designed to be a hub of technology, entrepreneurship, recreation and education for the neighborhood. In addition to Big Mama's restaurant, the Accelerator will house a coffee shop, an urban farming facility, and satellite locations for Creighton University and Metro Community College.

“So, that's another reason I'm just thrilled about moving because I'll be on 30th street, which is a very busy street and there are going to be other businesses in the complex. I just wish they would hurry up so I could move next month!” said Barron.

The 74-year-old Barron remembers when North Omaha was a bustling community full of shops, restaurants and nightclubs. Her father was a musician and she recalls a time when “there were musicians on every corner. There was a music teacher on every block.”

She is hopeful that the neighborhood can return to its former vitality. The team at Seventy Five North believes that Big Mama's Kitchen is a cornerstone in the revitalization of North Omaha.

“I love Omaha. This is my birth city and I want the best and I’d like for this to be the best city in the nation,” said Barron. “I’m hoping that this Highlander project will be the first step toward the revitalization of North Omaha because there’s so much negativity about North Omaha and I think this is a very positive step.”

The success of Big Mama’s Kitchen is firmly rooted in its neighborhood. Barron uses recipes that she collected from previous generations of African-American cooks and cafe owners in North Omaha. In some cases, she’s preserved parts of a culinary tradition that might otherwise have been lost. Recipes for fried shrimp, pancakes, and peach cobbler were passed down to Barron and can still be found on the menu.

Big Mama’s Kitchen plays an even more important role in the life of North Omaha. Barron believes in providing employment and job training to people in need of a second chance. She speaks with great pride about the Omaha-area chefs she’s helped train, Cornell and Dwayne, who are now chefs at large hotels in downtown Omaha.

“They’re my pride and joy because they’ve come straight out of prison. I’m just so proud of them,” said Barron. “You know, we’ve graduated four chefs already, I’m just so proud of them.”

Not everyone would take a chance on hiring people who were convicted felons, let alone help them gain job skills or attend culinary school, but Barron sees it differently.

“I found that a lot of young people want a second chance and when they step out to get that second chance to change their lives, we need to hire them. We need to hire them. We need to provide employment for them,” said Barron.

It’s for that reason that Big Mama’s Kitchen fits in so well with the mission of the Highlander. She also exemplifies professionalism, good parenting and giving. Barron and her late husband, who was a hydro-technician for the Municipal Utilities District in Omaha, raised five daughters and sent them to Catholic prep school. Today she has 19 grandkids, 27 great-grandkids, and 2 great-great grandkids. Some of her family members work with her in the business and multiple generations are often gathered in the large dining room.

What’s even more impressive is that Barron didn’t start the business until she retired from corporate life.

“I thought, wow, I’m 65. I’d better hurry up and do something if I’m going to do the restaurant,” she laughs.

A Navy veteran, Barron was disappointed to learn that women weren't allowed to be cooks when she joined the service. Instead, she was trained to be a bookkeeper. It's a skill that has helped her throughout her career. After serving her country, Barron went to work for the phone company as a computer operator and started a family. She originally went to the University of Nebraska, Omaha to be a social worker, but switched to culinary school when she realized that line of work wasn't for her.

Barron dreamed of opening her own restaurant, but a management opportunity opened up at the phone company as she was graduating from culinary school. Women and minorities were starting to be recognized and promoted in the company and Barron was among the first put on a management track. She decided to stay with her corporate career.

It wasn't always easy. An African-American woman in the corporate world in the '70s still had an uphill battle, but she persevered and succeeded. She recalls that eventually people said, "We need to work for Pat because she can get things done."

In 1990 she retired from the phone company, by then it was Qwest, and continued to work at Oriental Trading Company and The Maids. She finally fulfilled her lifelong dream and opened Big Mama's Kitchen and Catering in 2007. Like many members of her generation, Barron has redefined "retirement." She thinks it's an ideal time to fulfill a dream because bills are paid, kids are raised, and "you can really go do what you want to do."

"Big Mama" also has advice for people thinking about starting their own restaurant. "Well, number one I think you have to serve good food. People today are looking for real food, not processed food or food that's been warmed over in the microwave," said Barron. "Then I think that people have to have a pleasant experience when they come to your restaurant. I mean, we make people feel like they're here at home."

She works hard to train her staff to do things the "Big Mama" way. She expects her staff to be honest, interested in food and culinary arts, and enthusiastic about coming to work. She chooses to hire people who need a second chance.

"Because we want them to be productive citizens, you know, we want them to add something to the community," said Barron. "And hopefully by giving them a second chance they'll be the future leaders of North Omaha and can bring more things to North Omaha. I have found that the folks who are felons, they're very intelligent people and they have a lot to bring and offer. They just need to be given a chance."

Giving back to the community she loves is just a part of Barron. "I was born in a generation where you were taught to give back. Once you've made your

success, then you give back and help people that are coming under you,” she said.

Patricia Barron thinks that the Highlander is a key part of what will be an economic revitalization of Omaha’s northside. She points out the beautiful old homes and beautiful people who make up the neighborhood. When she worked with young people through the Urban League she noticed that they would marvel at the shops and development on the more affluent, west side of the city.

“They had never seen anything like that around here and I thought we really need to do something in our community to bring more stuff here. More shops, more stores, so people can see, ‘yes there is hope, yes, there is a life, yes we can do that in North Omaha,’” Barron said.

“Big Mama” has one, simple message for people who wish to make the city a more vibrant place, “Come to North Omaha.”