



## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT: Nickel Diner

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We had the opportunity to interview our clients, Kristen Trattner and Monica May, co-owners of Nickel Diner. We gained insight into their experience founding the diner and navigating challenges during the pandemic. They were able to adapt to the community's needs and stay relevant while remaining resourceful during these troubling times. With the help of KROST and PPP resources, Nickel Diner was able to stay in business despite the economic shift. In addition to running the day-to-day operations of a restaurant, Kris and Monica have taken an active interest in feeding their Skid Row community from the beginning of the pandemic to present day.

### HOW WAS NICKEL DINER FOUNDED?

Monica May: "Kris and I are LA natives as we were born and raised in the San Fernando Valley. We opened the restaurant in Downtown LA in 2008 during the height of the recession. It was not a great time for a women-owned business to start. We fantasized about a restaurant that could offer food to the local community. We found an abandoned restaurant with great bones and a kitchen in the front and back. We fell in love with the space. During the construction, as we pulled down paneling, we unearthed a 1940's diner, including original signage and menus. The sign above the door read 'This is the place, there is no place quite like this place, so this must be the place'. The universe gave us a gift."

### HOW WAS THE OPENING?

The diner is located in the Historic Core of DTLA, adjacent to Skid Row. No one showed up the first couple of weeks, so we practiced "playing restaurant" by feeding the locals who lived in the surrounding SRO's (Single Room Occupancy, government-subsidized homes). The idea of the Nickel Diner was to be inclusive as opposed to exclusive. We feed a mixed population and everyone is welcome.

## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE NICKEL DINER? WHAT TYPE OF FOOD DO YOU SERVE?

The diner has a whimsical style. We make handcrafted, affordable food. Our specialties include pop-tarts, donuts, seasonal jams and biscuits. We've been featured on Food Network's "Diners Drive Ins and Dives" Unique Eats, Bobby Flay as well as LA Times Food Critic Jonathan Gold's 101 Best Restaurants and numerous other food publications.

## HOW HAVE YOU BEEN MANAGING THE PANDEMIC, CLOSURES, AND REGULATIONS?

When the pandemic hit, our business was put on hold. As a restaurant, we initially thought we would be closed for 2 weeks and would reopen thereafter. Kris' brother is a top pathologist, so we asked for his opinion on the situation. He said, "If the pandemic was an earthquake, this would be a nine on the Richter scale. Close your doors!" So, we closed the weekend before the mandate and had enough money to give the employees their final paychecks. We gave everyone what was left of the food, packed the rest in the freezer, and said, "See you in 2 weeks." However, we quickly realized it was not going to be 2 weeks as we originally thought. "How do we help?" – since we saw things taking a turn for the worse.

## WHAT IS DINE 11?

Dine11 was a non-profit organization that we partnered with during the pandemic, which provided small subsidies to restaurants to feed health care workers. These subsidies allowed us to keep a core group of employees, feed people in need and keep our restaurant doors open. As the pandemic began wreaking havoc on our Skid Row community, we realized we could expand these meals to feed folks right on our block. We decided to convert ourselves into a soup kitchen. We relied on donations and grants to subsidize our meal program. These meals were subsidized by people who saw the need and wanted to help us assist others.



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During the holidays, when many of the homeless organizations on Skid Row were limiting services due to COVID outbreaks, we partnered with Skid Row Housing Trust to provide over one thousand meals to low-income residents for Thanksgiving and Christmas. We eventually called this our “Pay It Forward” Program. For a \$12 donation, you could buy a meal for someone in need. With generous donations from customers and others who saw the importance in what we were doing, we had the opportunity to supply upwards of 300 meals weekly to the Union Rescue Mission and the John Wesley Healthcare Center on Skid Row. At the time, the actual restaurant was open only twice a week with a take-out option only, so the meal program donations are what sustained us. We realized this was a smart pivot for our business.

## HOW DID KROST PARTNER WITH YOUR OPERATION?

KROST calmed the storm when we needed financial assistance. They helped us with the PPP loan application and took care of all the paperwork. This allowed us to focus on our business and relieved the mental stress of the unknown. We were comforted knowing that someone was behind us since the rules kept changing for the PPP. We feared we would end up in debt because of the misunderstanding of the PPP loan, but KROST knew how to brilliantly navigate these waters. When the pandemic started, we sought help from an old school friend who happened to be married to Lou Guerrero, Tax Principal at KROST. Lou connected us with Eimy ZhangZheng and she’s been so helpful ever since.

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## ON YOUR WEBSITE YOU SAID THAT YOU PLANNED TO SERVE MEALS FOR 2 MONTHS, HOW DID IT GO? ARE YOU STILL SERVING?

We started with Dine11 in April 2020 and in October 2020, we began offering weekly meals on our own. However, we needed money to subsidize the meals. When we received donations and grants between October 2020 – August 2021 we were offering 300 meals a week. It’s difficult to maintain consistency with donations. Today in 2022, we are still feeding the Union Rescue Mission and John Wesley organizations on a regular basis. There still remains a tremendous amount of food insecurity on Skid Row, especially with rampant inflation.

## WHAT IS REGARDING HER?

Regarding Her(RE:Her) Food is an organization for women chefs and restaurateurs to reach out, support, and organize fantastic female energy in the industry. We have had great support from RE:Her. They organized a 10 Day Food festival in LA to promote women-owned restaurants and helped us launch our “Pay it Forward” Meal Program. We were also a recipient of a \$10,000 grant RE:Her and Door Dash sponsored to support women-run restaurants. Throughout this whole process, so many women have helped us. Monica had a bad kitchen accident and was unable to work for a bit. Other women chefs stepped in to help her to maintain the weekly Mission meals. Female restaurant owners always have to fight harder to get things done. Now, if your A/C breaks, you have a network of referrals to find someone honest and reliable. It’s tremendous and empowering. As women, we have these common experiences, but now we are not alone.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE REACTIONS THAT YOU'VE RECEIVED FROM THIS NEW MISSION?

The local homeless organizations are extremely happy that we support them. We don't just drop the food off, but rather, we go the extra mile, bring it in and set it up. A lot of the food they receive is leftovers or expired. We specifically make comfort food for them, such as biscuits and gravy, mac and cheese, bbq chicken and pulled pork sandwiches. Food we know they would enjoy eating. We actively participate in the service of the food which allows us to make connections with the folks in our community. Every week we look people in the eye and acknowledge them. When you bond over something delicious and find common ground, it humanizes people and takes away that sense of "the other".

## HOW HAS THIS CHANGED THE FUTURE OF NICKEL DINER?

In September, we started to open Thursday thru Sunday with extended hours and our regular customers are slowly coming back. We were also honored to be featured at the 2021 James Beard Awards, as part of their "Stories of Resilience and Leadership" during the pandemic. We are continuing with our mission to look after our community. For most of the general public, poverty and homelessness are out of sight, out of mind. Perhaps if we didn't see it every day on our own street, we wouldn't be so aware, but we feel anyone else would do the same.

KROST is proud to help Nickel Diner, along with other clients to get through the pandemic. We strive to provide our clients with the resources they need to stay profitable and continue making a difference. Like Nickel Diner, most of our clients are referrals, so if you know someone who could benefit from our services, send them our way or contact us. ■



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