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Behind Noam's Table is a man who persevered

By Will Carpenter Wyoming Tribune Eagle
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Noam Mantaka works in his food truck, Noam's Table, as he fills orders on Friday just outside Black Tooth Brev many trials in life before landing in Cheyenne and starting his food truck to share his traditional Israeli cooking Gelhart/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

It was 2011, and Noam Mantaka had just been robbed and left sprawled out on the pavement with a broken leg and a cracked skull, waiting for help to arrive in Bakersfield, California.

After lying in a hospital bed for eight days, a doctor told him he may never walk again.

This was not the first, nor would it be the last time Mantaka was left down and out.

Before he arrived in Cheyenne, the world was particularly brutal for Mantaka, who most of the community might recognize as the owner of the Noam's Table food truck that can often be seen parked in various locations downtown.

There wasn't always a food truck, and he often didn't have any money, but there was always opportunity.

Mantaka is here now, he said, because, even at the lowest points in his life, he saw opportunity and seized it when the moment came.

"You have friends, you have kids, you need to want to survive," Mantaka said. "If you give up ... then no one can help you. But if you say, 'Yeah, I'm in a very bad situation now, the deepest of the deep, but let's see how I can get out of it' ... It takes time, but you have the power to get out of it."

He serves traditional Israeli cooking, inspired by the food that he wishes his mother had made for him when he was a young boy growing up in Holon, Israel. But when he was 10 years old, his family relocated to Bnei Brak, Israel.

Bnei Brak is a religious city, unlike Holon, meaning that Mantaka was required to attend a school where he learned little outside of how to one day be a rabbi. He had always wanted to be a pilot, but, more than anything, he wanted to learn.

Eventually, when he was around 15 years old, he transferred to a half-religious school where he could focus slightly more on traditional subjects, in which he performed well the year through. However, a young Mantaka failed to turn in a sole assignment, and as a result was kicked out of school.

He worked odd jobs, ending his teenage years by completing eight months of school through his required military service, deciding that he would build a career as an electrician.

At age 22, he was married with a child, struggling to pay bills as a low-level electrician.

Instead, he turned to a career that would bring in enough money to support his family. For almost 10 years, he would work as a bus driver until times simply became too tough.

“It was very hard,” Mantaka said. “Long hours outside the house and long shifts ... you come home very tired, and you cannot contribute in the house. My marriage came to be more and more difficult.”

There was a divorce and a battle for their two children. He built their house, only to have it taken from him. He had a three-month stint in Santa Clarita, California, working to send money back to the family.

On his return to Israel, he quit his job as a bus driver with plans to indefinitely return to a somewhat successful job in the United States. His ex-wife thought he was fleeing, so he was barred from travel.

For eight months, he was stuck in Israel, fighting for his right to leave the country and work. His father carried the burden for him, accepting financial responsibility for his family, letting Mantaka return to the United States.

“It was very hard, and there were a lot of lies,” Mantaka said. “Then, she turned the kids against me, parental alienation, so it was very hard to communicate with my kids.”

Even today, Mantaka is working through a complicated situation with his children, whom he loves dearly, by making an effort to text them every day, at every chance he gets.

But a lot has happened between his life now and his life in Israel.

A lot has changed – for the better

Before he was jumped after leaving his job as a manager at a mall kiosk in Bakersfield, he worked short stints in Arizona, Colorado, San Francisco, California and Hawaii, taking a month-long trip back to Israel during this time.

Then, as he left the mall in Bakersfield, he felt a knife at his throat, followed by a baseball bat to the back of his head. He was 40 years old when he learned to walk again at his friend's house in Pasadena, California.

From there, he mall-hopped, selling hair straighteners at kiosks in Cheyenne, Arizona once again, and then El Centro, California, where he lived for the longest span of time within those years.

He liked the heat in El Centro near the U.S border with Mexico, but didn't know what he was getting himself into.

“I did not know that the place would be very bad ...” he said. “It was very hard. I invested in a restaurant with my friends, so here comes a story of how I lost everything.”

In 2016, as a co-owner of a Mediterranean restaurant in El Centro, his business partner cut him out of a restaurant renovation deal, taking \$30,000 from Mantaka, leaving him penniless.

In a last-ditch effort, he drove to Cheyenne to stay with a connection he had made during his time working at the mall. Searching for a direction, he fell back on his career as a truck and bus driver, with a plan to apply for a commercial license.

“This was one of the deepest levels that I had in life, but I did not give up,” Mantaka said. “I believed in myself. I said, ‘You know, this is life. Like a cat, I will land on my feet – land on my feet and jump up.’”

Without a high school diploma of any kind, he took the test, to surprising results. At the recommendation of the test practitioner, he would not become a truck driver, but would apply to Laramie County Community College.

His English was still fairly broken, so to achieve his new goal of being accepted to college without any former education, he needed a tutor. Abby Rowswell served as his English as a Second Language teacher, where over a span of one week, she had him write and rewrite an entrance essay as practice for the actual test, refining and reworking every line.

“I did the essay, and, surprisingly, I passed,” Mantaka said. “I got accepted to college. It was very hard to get the degree, but next thing you know, I started to talk with Abby.”

Rowswell eventually stopped teaching, returning to her old job at the library while Mantaka was working his way through college.

“And then we got married,” Mantaka said, laughing.

Through all of this, Mantaka never stopped cooking. He does not consider himself a chef, but someone who wants to make good, clean and affordable food that customers can enjoy. It is true Israeli cuisine, but he throws a certain flair into the fine details, like a za’atar spice on his fries.

As a child in Israel, he took baby steps, learning to cook chicken, eggs and other dishes that his mother never really prepared. He did it to feed himself, but it led him to his passion for cooking, for food and for the people that eat his food.

Talent turns into a livelihood

He knew there was something special about his cooking when people first tried his hummus.

“I love to cook, so you know, when I get to the States and I taste this hummus, I said, ‘Why do they call it hummus? This is not hummus.’”

While at LCCC, he came to realize the sheer lack of quality in store-bought hummus. It was nothing like he had grown up with at home, so he took the steps to make his own.

Every Friday, he would bring more and more homemade hummus to his friends at the college. His mother-in-law encouraged him to expand and turn his hobby into a packaged product.

He took his creation to the Cheyenne winter farmers market and was met with great success. Soon, he would add specialty salads made up of bell peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers and parsley. Pita bread, which he made at home, would sell out by the end of every event.

“After the year that I sold over there and people get to know all about me and my hummus, I said, ‘I need to make falafel,’” Mantaka said. “I found a food cart for sale in Steamboat (Springs, Colorado) that someone had been selling falafel from.”

Every farmers market, Mantaka paid \$25 for a temporary permit to cook and sell his falafel. He said he doesn’t miss having to lug the massive cart around, or spend no less than two hours setting up and breaking it down every day.

But the falafel was a hit. He needed to expand again.

The limitations of a food cart can be crippling. He wasn't able to sell at will, like he desired. He had tried several times to get cleared by the health department as a seller, but had little success.

Just minutes after he made his decision to upgrade to a food truck, a seller from Colorado posted a brand new model on Craigslist. It was relatively new, spacious for storing ingredients ahead of time, and it would let him move to different areas like never before.

But one buyer was ahead of him, and there was the chance that he would lose out on the deal of a lifetime.

"I was so stressed, everyone was crossing their fingers," Mantaka said. "Then, Sunday evening, I texted the guy and said, 'What's going on?' He said, 'You have the food truck.' I was so happy."

His in-laws fronted him the money. He fought to renovate the inside of the truck to comply with city code, adding a sink, running water and an emergency fire extinguishing system required by law.

He received a permit within a month. Business took off to where he was already able to pay back half the cost of the truck.

Since his earliest days selling to Cheyenne-area residents, he has seen nothing but customers eager to try his food, but he has no intention of upgrading. He also has a 2-year-old son now, and the flexibility of the truck keeps him available to spend time with his young family.

"I have my share, and I'm happy with that," Mantaka said. "You know, sometimes when you have more assets, you have more worries. I don't want to have worries."

There certainly aren't any when it comes to Noam's Table, though there were plenty of them throughout the journey. Money has always been an issue for Mantaka, but not anymore.

If he wanted more money, he would work every day of the week, or open up a brick-and-mortar restaurant, but that simply isn't the goal.

It never really was.

"I think that if the customer is satisfied enjoying (my food), that is what brings me joy," Mantaka said. "If I ended the day without enough money, or even losing money, but I have customers that when they bought it they enjoy the food, then I'm happy."

Where worries persist with Mantaka are with his children from his first marriage, who are still in Israel and still somewhat estranged. They are now in their mid-20s and living adult lives, but they still, on the whole, refuse to interact with him regularly.

Parental alienation is a painful issue in his home country, and it is one that he continues to struggle with every day. He has begun to text his son more recently, and has even gone on trips with his daughter, reconnecting after years of distance.

Never lazy, never disheartened, Mantaka continues to push himself into the lives of his children with the hope that this, too, will come together.

"I'm accepting everything I went through in life, including my ex-wife, what she did to me, money wise," Mantaka said. "There is one thing that is not accepting, and I'm still working on it until this day – that is to reach my kids and to be their father."

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