



## TABLE FOR SIX BILLION, PLEASE Told by Susan Dundon

One sunny spring morning in 1957, a ten-year-old girl with a feisty spirit and a passion for softball was just itching to play on the first day of the season. “Class,” her gym teacher announced, “it looks like a great day out there. Time to play ball!” The girl excitedly jumped from her seat.

“Guys down to the field,” said the coach. “Girls go over there and practice cheerleading.” The girl was dumbfounded. She stood dejectedly behind the backstop watching the boys play. She didn’t know enough to be angry.

For Judy Wicks, now the owner of the White Dog Café in Philadelphia, her first experience with discrimination was a definitive moment. As soon as she found her voice again, she was outraged by the notion that anyone should be excluded. And for the ensuing forty years, she’s been bringing people together, making sure that everyone gets to play the game.

Judy loves to tell another story, about something that happened when she was five years old. She ran a string of extension cords down the driveway and hooked up her record player. Then she turned it up to full volume, sat in a little chair, and waited to see who might come along. That was the opening of her first “restaurant.” She will never forget the excitement she felt when her first customer, Johnny Baker, a boy her age with big feet and big ears, walked shyly up the driveway.

Running a restaurant may seem like a perverse enterprise for a woman who once refused to cook, who leaped out the classroom window to avoid having to take home economics. But then, Judy doesn’t run “just a restaurant.” For her, food is the magic that brings people together.

The White Dog Café started simply, as a take-out muffin shop. One morning, when Judy leaned out her apartment window above her shop, she noticed there

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was a line of people waiting to be served. She brought a table and some chairs from her apartment and invited everyone to take a seat. It was an impulse that came naturally.

The muffin shop grew: Judy now has two hundred chairs in her restaurant, situated in three attractive town houses on a lovely, tree-lined street. The music that brought Johnny Baker up the driveway is always part of the festival atmosphere at the White Dog, whether it's Noche Latina (Latin Night), or tunes for other multicultural, intergenerational events there. But, the real heart of the White Dog Café, where people gather for fun and lively conversation, lies as much outside of its walls as within. Judy throws back her head and laughs when she says that she uses good food "to lure innocent people into social activism."

Judy had always wanted to create "one big, city-wide community." She thought that by getting people to sit down to a good dinner together and talk, they could begin to understand and appreciate their similarities, rather than fear their differences. When she asked around, community leaders suggested that she talk to Daphne Brown, the owner of Daffodil's Home Cooking, another café in North Philadelphia. Daffodil's is sandwiched between a sad-looking Shiloh Apostolic Temple and a garage whose door is badly in need of repair. Outside, a broken milk carton serves as a basketball hoop. Nearby, vacant lots are strewn with broken bottles. A telephone pole on the corner bears a sign: DRUG FREE SCHOOL ZONE. The local media has dubbed it "the Badlands."

Daphne remembers Judy walking in the door one day, introducing herself, and sharing her idea about bridging cultural and ethnic groups by bringing people together to join in a meal. To start, they arranged an evening of entertainment at the Freedom Theater, one of the oldest African-American theaters in the country, followed by dinner at Daffodil's. Several dozen mostly white and affluent White Dog customers came and had a lot of fun. As the first participants in the White Dog Sisters Restaurants Program, they still come, from time to time, and they've brought Daphne new catering jobs. With the addition of more "sister restaurants" in Philadelphia, a Latino restaurant in the barrio, and a Korean-American restaurant in Olney, Judy sees her community dream growing.

But Judy's dream isn't confined to Philadelphia. She is adding more chairs for her extended "community" around the world. Her invited guests include people

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from Nicaragua, Lithuania, Vietnam, Cuba, Thailand, and Mexico. Her tongue-in-cheek name for her international "sister restaurants" program is "Eating with the Enemy." Most come from nations that have policy misunderstandings and disputes with the U.S. government. Judy wants to know why.

To find out, she takes an educational scouting mission to "enemy" territory each year, under the auspices of a nonprofit organization such as Global Exchange. The following year, she and some of her White Dog customers return. During their two-week visit, they look for a suitable "sister restaurant," where they get to know ordinary people. Through their explorations, they learn how U.S. policy affects people in that country. They come to appreciate the country's hardships and learn firsthand about the misunderstandings that exist between cultures and nations.

Harriet Behringer is a White Dog customer who has accompanied Judy on trips to Vietnam, Cuba, and Mexico. "These experiences have increased my understanding and knowledge of my world," she says. "I've laughed and learned and cried. Above all, I've discovered that we are not eating with the enemy, but with friends."

It isn't certain yet what new friends will join Judy's community, or what countries they live in. Bosnia, perhaps, or Palestine, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, or Indonesia. Wherever Judy goes, extension cords will connect; music will play. There will always be room for another chair at the table, a place for everybody in the world.

This is Judy's vision: "Table for six billion, please!"

*Most politicians will not stick their necks out unless they sense grass-roots support . . . neither you nor I should expect someone else to take our responsibility.*

KATHARINE HEPBURN

Learn how to mix social activism with sound business practices and good food. Call 215-386-9224 and ask to receive the **White Dog Café's** quarterly newsletter, *Tales from the White Dog Café*, or visit their Web site at [www.whitedog.com](http://www.whitedog.com).

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