



## Business owners who care for Washington's powerful now look to them for survival

By [Kate Bennett](#), CNN

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**(CNN)** — The nation's capital is a town where relationships are currency -- and where behind all the partisan bluster, most businesses run in a party-free zone, serving and tending to both Republicans and Democrats. They actually operate not knowing, nor particularly caring, who is whom, as long as the customers are kind and repeat business, bills get paid and people, to the left or the right, treat each other well.

And then the [coronavirus pandemic](#) hit Washington, DC.

These business owners have cared for, fed, clothed, hosted and slung cocktails for Washington's most powerful movers and shakers. They've served them drinks after tough votes didn't go their way, dressed them when constituents wouldn't take notice, handled the menu for deal-brokering dinner parties, groomed and soothed and primed in a hurry, when time was of the essence -- taken care of them.

Now, the tables are turned. What do you do when the people who have been your customers are now the people whose actions and decisions could very well determine your future? Nationally, everyone is bracing for the economic fallout, and with the backdrop of [a the worst national economic contraction since the Great Recession](#), all business becomes local.

Here are the stories of five local Washington business owners.



COURTESY: CENTROLINA

Amy Brandwein, chef and owner at Centrolina and Piccolina

"What's it been like? Well, today was not a good day," said Amy Brandwein, chef and owner of the award-winning, 60-seat Centrolina restaurant in the upscale retail and residential City Center area, and its sister market, Piccolina, located across the way. "Today, I felt really weighed down by the emotions of everything."

Brandwein had just heard her restaurants did not make it into the first round of the Paycheck Protection Program loans.

"Just one month ago, I had this incredibly successful business, I had done everything right. I was careful with money, I was careful with expansion, I took care of my team, I was in a really, really good place," she said.

And then, it was gone.

Brandwein could still employ some of her 80 employees, keeping on an essential 20 as she pivoted business to take out and delivery. Everything was going well enough, but a few days ago, one of her team members came down with symptoms of Covid-19. Out of an abundance of caution, Brandwein shut everything down, alerting her customers and promising to return as soon as she possibly could, after deep cleanings to ensure the health and safety of her workers and her patrons. She's hopeful to start up again at some point in early May.

"To not know how to get out of this, to not have any assurance on how I'm going to get out of it, or when ... I'm used to having all the answers and for once I don't have them," Brandwein said.



The interior of Centrolina market

Her revenue is down 70% overall at the two businesses, both of which opened in 2015, she said, but she is still providing groceries every week for all of her employees, even the ones she has had to let go. Brandwein said she's also gotten some rent relief from her landlord, which helps, though every day she looks at her cash reserves and hopes it will be enough, for how long, is the question.

"Sometimes I make pasta in the morning," she said, an exercise that earned her fame and recognition as a chef, but now provides more than that, something for her soul. "Dinner seems to start for people now at 4:30, that's when the to-go and delivery orders started coming in. It's like everyone's so bored they can't wait to start dinner. For me, it's a much shorter day since coronavirus, by the clock -- but a much longer day by every other measure."

Brandwein said hearing from regular customers, or even seeing them for a few seconds if they came in to grab food for takeout, has been restorative, just knowing they haven't forgotten about her.

"That, to us, is gold," she said.

After 20 years in Washington working as a chef at some of the city's most notable eateries, Brandwein is tougher than most, but she has days, like this one, where she feels broken.

"I have been part of restaurants that have closed, like, couldn't stay in business, so I'm conditioned to know what that feels like, and that isn't new to me," said Brandwein. "The emotional part now is going through that similar death, but here, I did nothing wrong."

**Nina McLemore, owner and operator -- Nina McLemore boutiques**



Nina McLemore, owner and operator of Nina McLemore boutiques

Nina McLemore knew it was coming.

"I went to Paris on February 14 for the semi-annual fabric show, and 30% of the people who are normally there weren't," said McLemore, who attends the show as a buyer and overseer of her 13 eponymous clothing boutiques, the second-largest, behind New York City, of which is in Chevy Chase, Maryland, literally across the street from the Washington, DC, border. "The airports were empty, the planes weren't full. It was clear to me, this was really serious."

McLemore lives in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, but the mills she uses to make the fabrics that produce her clothes are based mostly in Northern Italy; by March 1st, she was well aware life was already in a global shift.

Her stateside stores eventually all closed for the foreseeable future. McLemore now spends her days devouring information, watching numbers of Covid-19 cases all over the country, waiting for news of which region might open first. She also passes hours talking to her regular customers -- because many of them work on Capitol Hill, or in the White House.

"We have a lot of clients, most of them in in Washington, in divisions of the government," said McLemore, ticking off names such as Trump Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-West Virginia, former secretary of state and 2016 Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, and perhaps her most photographed customer this past year, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts, who recently ended her 2020 presidential bid.

"I was surprised by how many people look up what she's wearing and come in to shop. I think she must have every color cardigan and blazer we make," said McLemore, whose ubiquitous, colorful suit jackets typically sell for between \$650-900.

McLemore is consumed with staying afloat. She has 36 full-time people on staff, but employs at least 100 more in New York's garment district, where her line is manufactured. She has been able to pivot her manufacturers to turn her wares into masks, 7,000 of which she just delivered to Children's National Hospital.



Interior of Nina McLemore boutique

Overall, though, she said her regular sales for March were down 53%, and her total business down 80%. But her internet sales are only down 20%, a hopeful sign that her customers still need to look polished and professional, at least from the waist up.

"With Zoom and Skype, when you think about it, you're much more conscious of how that person looks because that's all you see, just them," McLemore said. "I know a lot of our customers personally. I've been reaching out to encourage them to buy now, so that we have enough money to make payroll."

McLemore said one client bought a \$20,000 gift certificate, from which McLemore used \$7,000 to help 20 deserving women who had undergone an education program with an outfit for work, citing an overwhelming need to give back.

Like her fellow small business owners, she's also figuring out regulations for a Paycheck Protection Program loan.

"It became clear to me that my bank was going to have trouble, so we moved banks," said McLemore, whose introduction to her new bank was handled by none other than former chair of the Federal Reserve Janet Yellen, a longtime client, and an example of the "small town" feel that can sometimes happen with the exchange of goods and services in a city such as Washington.

"That definitely helps. But, new bank means new relationships, and the paperwork alone took 10 days," she said.

McLemore at the time of our interview had not yet heard if she got into the first round of the surplus.

"I'm flying blind," she said.

She's not sure how coming back in full will work, but she acknowledges it will be a "slow ramp up, because people have to trust. The issue is going to be confidence. And that's testing, which we aren't doing enough."



COURTESY COLUMBIA ROOM

Derek Brown, owner of Columbia Room

"I thought about this place as a 20 or 30 year operation when I imagined it, and when I opened it," said Derek Brown of [Columbia Room](#), a swank bar in DC's Shaw neighborhood that is consistently ranked as one of the city's best, if not the nation's best, watering holes.

"So far we've had 10 great years. But, now, I don't know," he said, his voice trailing off, lost in the time and space vacuum that so many business owners find themselves in these days.

His bar has gone from serving alcoholic "tasting menus" and \$16 cocktails, to being a to-go joint, with what remains of his staff -- he's already laid off 15 employees -- selling drinks and "cocktail kits" to the few dozen customers that come by during the window that normally would have been happy hour.

"Sales are down overall 80%," said Brown, who applied for "everything under the sun," in terms of financial assistance.

"We applied for an SBA loan, we applied for the business grants DC is offering, we applied for a Verizon fund I saw, and we applied for the PPP, and I have no idea what's happening with that. Our bank has not responded. SBA? Haven't heard anything there either," said Brown, referring to the federal Paycheck Protection Program which was intended to help small businesses during the pandemic. He has yet to see a penny of government or federal support.

"(The banks) got overwhelmed, and I understand that. But we're finding a way to stay alive, so they have to find a way to help," he said.

Columbia Room has served high-profile members of both the Trump and Obama administrations since they've been open, and Brown himself has tended bar at the White House, several times during the Obama years.

but it's not like that. It's not the swamp," he said.



### Interior of Columbia Room

Brown's now found a way to give back to his city, launching the ["Get a Hero, Be a Hero" sandwich campaign](#), donating a sandwich to a DC hospital worker for every one sold.

Though he's planning to reopen Columbia Room, Brown sounds less enthused about what that might look like.

"We'll have measures that take away the hospitality aspect of what we do. Six feet apart? Who wants that? Bartenders in masks and gloves? It's hard to imagine an easy turnaround," said Brown, whose days now include homeschooling his five-year-old son. "We just don't know how it's going to go. It's like leaping off a cliff and building wings as we fall down."

Brown said he's going to fight for his business, fight for his workers to come back, fight for more nights of music, celebrations, clinking glasses, laughter and conviviality, but there's something in his voice, something that says uncertainty might be winning.

"Is a place like Columbia Room even a thing anyone wants anymore? I hope so, but I don't know," said Brown, saying out loud one of his biggest fears. "I know what I want. I want out of this spending more time with the people I really care about. Long conversations with those I love."

And placing hope in the Washingtonians he's come to know as regulars?

"I think the long and short of it is I don't need to have faith in the government, because I have faith in people. I know that the American people and the people in Washington will make the right decisions going forward, and I believe in that. I have to," he said.

# Occasions Caterers

"I like to say that food is not political," said Eric Michael, who with his twin brother, Mark, founded Occasions Caterers in the 1980s.

The two have gone on to grow the business to 800 employees and a massive commissary in the Brookland neighborhood of Washington, preparing meals for thousands of Washington's most bold-faced names.

"We feed lots of government folks, our local community -- the power players are my customers, on both sides of the aisle, prominent Democrats and Republicans," he said.

Right now, however, Occasions is mostly feeding the families of those people and new customers discovering the business via the company's hastily established home delivery service. They are also feeding a population Michael's food has rarely reached: the homeless.

"We now have a contract with the DC Department of Housing to use our facilities to produce a few hundred meals a day for our homeless population. It's been, for us, a really important way to help out, and it has the added benefit of keeping most of our employees working," said Michael.

He's also launched a mobile market in several locations around the region to bring local produce and farm goods from outlying areas, paired with Occasions' own prepared meals, to customers who order online for pickup. Michael noticed lots of the farmers he worked with pre-coronavirus were suffering, unable to get their goods to shuttered farmers markets.

"A portion of our mobile market dollars goes back into emergency feeding. We're trying to provide, not make a profit," he said.

It's been a quick and essential pivot for a high-end catering company that saw a massive drop in the hundreds of bookings it had on the calendar -- weddings, bar mitzvahs, graduation celebrations.

numbers, until they were all gone.

Michael said he's found comfort in getting a little philosophical, and looking to history. After all, when things in the nation or the community go south, he has often felt it first, because no one wants to celebrate. Catering is a barometer of society's collective temperature.

"Black Monday, 9/11, even the DC sniper attacks (in 2002), intermittent government shutdowns. Having business go away is an unfortunate reality of our business. We've adapted before to understand what we have control over, and what we don't," said Michael. He added that a personal silver lining this time around is his parents, both in their 80s, who have moved in with him from their retirement community.

"The last time I sat to dinner with my parents every night was when I was a kid. So, that's been great and it's helped me search for meaning in all of this," he said.

As for how he's preparing for a return to normalcy, Michael said the most important thing for his business, no matter who he serves, congressman or common citizen, will be health and safety.

"If people don't feel comfortable going into a gathering then nothing matters. If someone wants to host but the guests don't want to come, there's no party," he said.

Michael said there will be no more buffets, no more passed food.

"I know we'll do more food stations with chefs in gloves and masks, serving individual plates. We're going to take the communal part out," he said.

Economically, the bells and whistles of creative catering -- late-night food trucks, sushi bars and expensive specialty items -- are going to be pared back.

"I would predict we're going to focus on healthy and fresh and simple foods that don't feel out of step with the environment we're all in. People aren't looking for molecular and exotic," he said.

like a chicken kind of time, I guess.

## Doan "Dawn" Nguyen, aesthetician and owner -- Georgetown Nail Salon

Doan "Dawn" Nguyen had her eye on the shoe store downstairs for at least two years. It wasn't huge, maybe a few hundred square feet, but it would provide the expansion she'd envisioned for her business, Georgetown Nail Salon, which is located upstairs. When the landlord said she could rent the shoe store, after it finally went out of business, she pounced.

"Just after the architect submitted the paperwork for permits to start the renovation down there, everything stopped," Nguyen said of the coronavirus shutdown.

Nguyen has run Georgetown Nail Salon since 1997, regularly servicing hundreds of Washington's most notable women (and men) with manicures and pedicures, waxing, eyelash extensions, microblading and facials.

On any given day, when you walk up the narrow flight of stairs and into the small salon, you'll see movers and shakers, including some of DC's most prominent society hostesses and influential lobbyists. There are notables from both political parties, be they Hope Hicks, Valerie Jarrett or Fox News' Shannon Bream. It's a who's-who of Washington, but in baseball caps and Lululemon leggings, on their days off getting a fresh coat of gel nail polish, elongating their tv-ready lashes or grooming their eyebrows.

Nguyen's most famous client, whose nails she has done for almost a decade now, is former first lady Michelle Obama.

Though 'waiting it out' is what life revolves around now, not so much tending to the nails of the rich and famous. Nguyen has a glass-half-full mindset.

trac. And in the meantime, she's had to come to terms with doing something she's never done before, accepting help.

"I've been working all my life to support myself and my family, so I feel uncomfortable when people reach out. It makes me feel strange," said Nguyen, a divorced mother who emigrated to America from Vietnam in 1989 when she was 18. "Yesterday, another client said, 'can we help?' and I finally said, 'If you want to a little, please feel free to do so.' Clients are so nice to do that. It's very touching, it's kind of ... I was speechless."

Nguyen, whose children are now two teenage girls, said in the days when the shutdown was looming, and inevitable, her customers loaded her and her employees with ballooning tips, extra cash, they said: "just in case."

"I got so emotional. I wish it was a dream, but it's not. It's real," she said.

"All of my savings are in this business," said Nguyen, adding the expansion had just about drained any additional resources.

The downstairs spot will have the same services as upstairs, but the ground floor location not only fulfills her decades-long dream of a Wisconsin Avenue storefront, it will also help with clients who have mobility issues.

"I'm going to have to rebuild pretty much from scratch," she said. "I know Covid doesn't do me any favors, but I am very fortunate, very positive. The future is uncertain, but we'll be back, we'll be safe. We'll just wait until we squash the virus out of America."

**CORRECTION:** This story has been updated to reflect chef and owner Amy Brandwein's revenue is down 70% as a result of coronavirus.



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