

PARENTING/GIVING BACK

# Redefining Hospitality

Bellevue-based restaurant group delivers world-class dining  
— and service to community

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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PHOTO: Credit: Ascend Hospitality Group

**Editor's note:** This article was sponsored by the [Ascend Hospitality Group](https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)).

For Elaina Morris, cofounder, president and CEO of [Ascend Hospitality Group](https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)) (AHG), owning a restaurant is about much more than feeding customers.

“I think what people forget is that it’s not just about going out to eat. You are our guest, just like you’re coming into our dining room at home. We’re feeding you, nourishing your body – and that’s a huge responsibility,” says Morris. “I wanted to have an independent restaurant company that got back to the foundations of hospitality.”

Morris’ five-year-old Bellevue-based company comprises seven restaurant brands, with 13 locations serving patrons throughout Washington, Oregon, Utah and Arizona. Here in Washington, AHG owns [Ascend Prime Steak & Sushi](https://ascendprime.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://ascendprime.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://ascendprime.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)) in Bellevue, [Stanford’s](https://stanfords.com/locations/northgate/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://stanfords.com/locations/northgate/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://stanfords.com/locations/northgate/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)) in Seattle’s Northgate neighborhood, [Stanford’s Steak](https://stanfordssteak.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://stanfordssteak.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://stanfordssteak.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)) in Tacoma, and locations of [Famous Dave’s](https://www.famousdaves.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://www.famousdaves.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.famousdaves.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)) in Tacoma and Tukwila. Morris established the company’s charitable arm, [AHG Cares](https://www.ascendhg.com/ahgcares/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://www.ascendhg.com/ahgcares/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.ascendhg.com/ahgcares/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)), to ensure that her vision for hospitality would nourish far more than just guests at the restaurant locations.

While Morris says she tries to avoid the buzzy tagline of “a socially responsible company,” AHG Cares reflects her belief that hospitality companies by their nature should always benefit the communities in which their employees live and work. For example, Community Cocktails, the newest program of AHG Cares, serves guests a unique cocktail experience, while also providing employees a voice and giving community nonprofits a boost.



*Elaina Morris is the cofounder, president and CEO of Ascend Hospitality Group. Credit: Ascend Hospitality Group*

One of the ways AHG empowers its teams is by giving them freedom to take initiative in community service. In a recent audit of the company's charitable works, Morris discovered that their locations' individual initiatives had donated a combined \$750,000 to local schools. Staff also hosted benefits, smoked turkeys for military families and fed first responders in Clackamas, Oregon, during recent wildfires.

"Part of service to the community as a company depends on the specific community. We're not trying to solve every community's issues the same way," says Morris.

In addition to the efforts of individual teams, AHG Cares enhances the company's overall impact and gives Morris a chance to be more directly involved in philanthropy. Eventually, she hopes to grow the department into its own nonprofit, but for now, AHG Cares develops one program at a time as needs are identified and resources become available. So far, the hospitality group has established three programs ([https://www.ascendhg.com/ahgcares/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.ascendhg.com/ahgcares/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)): 31 Lives, AHG Has Your Back and Community Cocktail.

The inspiration for the culinary education program 31 Lives was the observation that the hospitality industry is the entry point into the workforce for many, if not most, young people.

"If you think about the responsibility of that as well, it's kind of a big deal. If you can serve tables, you can do just about anything!" Knowing that restaurants train the next generation of workers, Morris wanted to do something more intentional than the trial by fire of entry-level food service jobs.

Pairing Ascend Prime Steak & Sushi in Bellevue with the culinary program at Newport High School in the Bellevue School District, AHG Cares is working to develop a full culinary education program in the school system based on Ascend Prime's 31 Lives program, which offers internships and professional development for aspiring culinarians. AHG Cares hopes to grow 31 Lives into a more formal system linked to statewide education programs, and to eventually add a hospitality management track.

"We've got kids who are essentially going through culinary school without any debt through their high school, eliminating the cost of higher education," says Morris.



*Ciara models the Dare to Roam backpacks. Credit: AHG*

The second program to launch was AHG Has Your Back, a back-to-school program that provides food and school supplies in backpacks custom-designed by celebrity partners, including former Seattle Seahawks player Cliff Avril and pop star Ciara. In partnership with Amazon, AHG connects with local nonprofits such as Rainier Athletes and regional Boys & Girls Clubs to identify students who will benefit from the AHG Has Your Back program. Each year of the program, AHG Cares has doubled the number of children served, giving away 500 backpacks this past school year.

AHG's newest program, Community Cocktail, donates \$1 from each sale of a featured cocktail to a local nonprofit. Employees provide input into the selection of the beneficiary nonprofits as well as creating the recipe for the featured cocktail.

"Back in the day, in the community pizzerias, especially where I grew up, local families that owned the restaurants would donate proceeds from the Pizza of the Week, usually to schools," Morris recalls. Similarly, AHG's portion of the proceeds program will support causes and organizations that matter to the local community. The Community Cocktail program is benefiting organizations that need it the most, such as nonprofits that work for equal rights for women, historically marginalized and underprivileged youths, the LGBTQ community and the unhoused – organizations that are often viewed as being too political for businesses to support.





*The Earl Grey Blues Community Cocktail. Credit: Ascend Hospitality Group*

“Community Cocktail proceeds go to a local charity battling for causes that don’t necessarily get a lot of prime time,” says Morris. “For us, it’s not political. It’s about what we need to do to protect the most fragile parts of our communities and help them thrive.”

Community Cocktail launched in February with the London Sunrise cocktail at Stanford’s in Northgate and the Earl Grey Blues cocktail at Stanford’s Steak in Tacoma. Both approachable, spring-themed creations were developed by members of individual restaurant bar teams.

In Tacoma, the inaugural beneficiary partner is Rainbow Center (<https://www.rainbowcntr.org/>), a South Sound–based nonprofit that serves the LGBTQ community as a resource center, providing workshops and training opportunities for individuals, businesses or groups that want to learn how to become better allies. In Northgate, proceeds will benefit Northwest Education Access (<https://www.nweducationaccess.org/>), a nonprofit that helps low-income youths

overcome profound barriers to accessing higher education – barriers such as housing insecurity, documentation status or marginalized identities – through comprehensive, individualized support.

Both cocktails will be available and continue to raise funds for these organizations through the spring. In early summer, AHG will introduce new team-developed cocktails to support other beneficiaries.

Find out more about Ascend Hospitality Group's restaurants and philanthropic programs on its website ([https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.ascendhg.com/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)).

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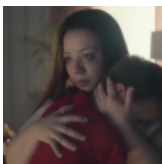
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