

# Portraits Podcast – *A Shortcut Across Time, With José Andrés* (Season 4, Episode 7)

[INTRO MUSIC]

**Audio Clip:**

Hello, people. I'm here in beautiful Dnipro and this is my best new friend. I'm here in one neighborhood de Bucha. You can see the markets back there. People are afraid.

**Audio Clip:**

The menu is here, is potatoes and radishes and meat and grain.

**Audio Clip:**

He's been giving all the honey to the locals, to the restaurants that are feeding people to the hospitals.

**Audio Clip:**

My Ukrainian is getting better by the second. I'm here with my good friend.

**Kim Sajet:**

Welcome to portraits. I'm Kim Sajet, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. My guest today is Jose Andres, the Michelin star chef who founded World Central Kitchen, the group brings relief one plate of food at a time to those affected by hurricanes, wildfires, and most recently, the war in Ukraine.

**José Andrés:**

Sometimes, in the most complicated moments of humanity, a plate of food becomes a lighthouse of hope.

**Kim Sajet:**

We're actually commissioning a portrait of José at the moment. That's because he will be receiving our Portrait of a Nation Award. And as we've been working on that commission, I've been reminded that José is also our neighbor. Our building sits right alongside several of his DC restaurants. For example, Zaytinya his Mediterranean restaurant, is a little north of the museum. And Jaleo, his Spanish restaurant is just a block to the south. So, if you're running two chaotic kitchens at the same time, and you need to get from one to the other really fast, you might look for a shortcut. And in this case, José's shortcut takes him right through the middle of the National Portrait Gallery. And he takes this route regularly.

**Justin O'Neill:**

You know, he also greets everybody in Spanish, so I'm not even going to try that.

**Kim Sajet:**

I retraced his footsteps recently with our editor, Justin O'Neill.

**Justin O'Neill:**

Alright, just so you know, I'm now recording. Okay, where are we going?

**Kim Sajet:**

So, let's say José started walking out the front door with a lamp heater in his hand from Zaytinya. And here's the big tip is don't order too much food because it just keeps coming. He crossed G Street. So should we cross? And then ran up the steps of the Portrait Gallery. And then we go into this amazing courtyard, called the Kogod courtyard then he'd emerge from the Portrait Gallery on F Street, just in time for sangria hour at Jaleo, and this was a really historic district. There's also a fantastic little museum tucked into our neighborhood. But I hadn't been there until José brought it up. He was speaking at a recent gallery event.

**José Andrés:**

How many of you, raise your hand? How many of you visit the Missing Soldiers Office Museum across the street from Jaleo, my first restaurant in DC. Don't, don't be shy.

**Kim Sajet:**

The Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum is named for the nurse who worked on the frontlines of the Civil War, and then later founded the American Red Cross. José often mentions her as someone who inspires his humanitarian work. Her photograph is in our collection.

**José Andrés:**

But it's fascinating, right? One person almost with nothing more than like my mom and she was a nurse. That woman alone, she was able to create something that for the times was astonishing.

**Kim Sajet:**

So, before we go to our interview with José, we want to take you there to the Clara Barton Museum. We pick up our story right here at our home base, the National Portrait Gallery. Before the Civil War. This was actually the patent office. And this was the place that you came to register your invention. So, we like to say that America's greatest invention has been its people. And there was a young female clerk working at the patent office from 1854 to 1857. She hadn't really found her calling yet. Her name was Clara Barton. But the patent office had a floor. As I explained to Justin on our way to Clara Barton's old digs. It was supposed to be completely fireproof. But then there's this giant fire that breaks out in the late 1800s. And about 700 patents, you know, the original ideas for inventions go up in flames. But before that, it was actually the largest place to have a party in the 1860s. So, Lincoln had his second inaugural ball in our building. And the story has it, you know, Lincoln, being a man of the people invited all of Washington to come and celebrate and people are carried out drunken from under the tables the next morning and people basically say to the president, let's never do that again. Okay, suggested and here we are. We're at Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum and it's right opposite Jaleo. So let's knock on the door. It's closed right now. Oh, there's the bus. Hey,

**David Price:**

Welcome.

**Kim Sajet:**

Hi, I'm Kim Sajet from the National Portrait Gallery.

**David Price:**

Come on in. I'm David Price Executive Director of the Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum. It's great to have you here.

**Kim Sajet:**

David Price showed us up a really, really steep stairwell. It's like the old days Stairmaster, you just do that three times and you've got a workout

**David Price:**

And imagine carrying supplies up there.

**Kim Sajet:**

Onto the third floor where Clara rented a space. And there's this old fashioned pattern wallpaper, which is pretty fantastic. When you look out the window, it looks straight down to Jaleo, and there's somebody setting up tables. It's dimly lit and sparsely decorated. Here's a portrait that we have of Clara Barton in the collection. And I was wondering if you can describe what you see.

**David Price:**

It almost reminds me of like the Mona Lisa.

**Kim Sajet:**

Oh, really.

**David Price:**

She's isn't really smiling. You can tell there's a lot on her mind. You know, knowing her story. There's a weight to her face right there. Her expression, you know, this is probably I'm guessing in the 1865 era after she's famous. She's sitting for Mathew Brady, a famous photographer. So it has to be after her experience of going to 16 battlefields and just being exhausted.

**Kim Sajet:**

So, um, José talks about coming here and discovering Clara Barton. What is it that you believe attracts him so much to her?

**David Price:**

I think because he's a guy who is driven to help his fellow man. And the thing that Clara Barton teaches us is one person's initiative can turn into an organizational initiative, which can change the world. And that's exactly what he's doing.

**Kim Sajet:**

Like José, Clara kind of became her own organization. She just stepped up when she saw a need.

**David Price:**

So, you know, she's a born in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1912. Her first nursing experience was when her brother had an accident, we think he fell off the roof of a barn, and she's assigned to nurse him back to health as a as a youngster. At 18 she gets her, her teaching degree. She forms the first public school in Bordentown, New Jersey, where she promptly is let go, because a man is better suited to be a principal of a school in those days, of course, as we all know, so that, that brings her to DC for work, where she has great handwriting and is of course meticulous and gets a job at the patent office. Fast forward to the 1860's. She's living in a capitol in chaos, you know, the Capitol dome isn't even finished. There's a buildup to war, they're soldiers everywhere. So, she's trying to figure out ways to help. Well, she's inspired by the Platt Street Riots, because it's really the first bloodshed of the Civil War.

**Kim Sajet:**

The Platt Street Riots broke out in Baltimore, in 1861. Union soldiers were changing trains enroute to Washington, D.C. when a mob attack them. A dozen people died and 24 soldiers were wounded.

**David Price:**

By the time they get into DC, limping into DC, everybody in town has heard about this. So, her and her sister go down to see if they can help at the train station. Well, lo and behold, she recognizes some of these guys, as students that she taught. This is a personal thing for her, it inspires her to action. Fast forward to she's in this space, realizes that the Union Army really isn't prepared for bandages, they've spent more time preparing for bullets. So, she takes on the task of caring for these soldiers in the Capitol building. And this motivates her to want to go on the front lines, there was really no nursing core yet. And in order to get to be a nurse in the army, you had to be of a certain age and plain looking because they were afraid you were going to be there for searching for a husband or something. So, she didn't really want to be a part of that. So, she writes to her father and says, you know, is this appropriate for me to want to go on the front lines, and he gives her permission and says if you feel a calling to help your fellow man, do what you must.

**Kim Sajet:**

You know, what I think is fascinating, too, is you know, 100 José Andres, his parents were nurses, and, and he has memories of actually going to the hospitals and waiting for them to finish their shifts and was always sort of surrounded by aid workers in the hospitals. If you think about it, it's not such a big stretch, right to then be attracted to the shero, who, you know, was coming at, as you said, sort of aid relief and feeding people at the same time because it was all all in, right? You didn't just sort of bind wounds. You were also feeding, clothing, writing letters and all the rest of it.

**David Price:**

Yeah, a lot of it was that personal touch. I mean, what it was a lot of nursing was water. A lot of nursing was simply giving them a bowl of soup, a cup of soup, and also, you know, holding someone's hand as they passed on to the next world. You know, she nurse so close to the battlefield. That bullet went through the sleeve of her dress and killed the man that she was nursing at the time. And she describes that.

**Kim Sajet:**

Wow.

**David Price:**

Yeah. So, it was personal to her and she was on the front lines just like José as these days is.

**Kim Sajet:**

Feeding People. José came to the National Portrait Gallery earlier this year for the premiere of the documentary *We Feed People* directed by Ron Howard. It follows José right into the fight in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, in New York City during the pandemic,

**José Andrés:**

If you are with boots on the ground, you can listen, you can listen to the situation, you can listen to the wind, you can listen to the waves, you can listen to the people.

**Kim Sajet:**

After the viewing, I interviewed José in front of a live audience. He had just come back from the war in Ukraine. World Central Kitchen and its local partners have served more than 100 million meals in response to the Russian invasion, even as the missiles fly.

**José Andrés:**

In Ukraine, we are learning we had to be feeding people in very difficult situations, outside Ukraine and inside Ukraine. With mines and, and missiles blowing in train stations where we were feeding. I always say that technically, we are not going to be saving and fixing the big problems we, we need to fix in America and around the world without taking some risks. We're not going to be improving the world, in the comfort of our homes. Or us by clapping in the big halls of Congress of the United Nations, we're only going to be fixing the wall when we are with boots on the ground, in the places next to the people that need our help. Where the voiceless are finally heard, where the people that need us to be next to them. When we show up, we need to be next to the people fighting. We call ourselves food fighters.

**Kim Sajet:**

In April, a Russian missile hit across the street from one of world's central kitchens partners in her cave. For staff members were hospitalized.

**José Andrés:**

The partner, the owner asked everybody, what do you want to do? And everybody said, we want to keep cooking. Which in a way means we want to keep fighting. There is many ways to fight to create the world we want all to live in the world we want to believe is within reach. Those

men and woman said we want to keep cooking. They move the equipment that was saved to another track, they move it to another location. Within two days that kitchen was up and running. This is the spirit that the men and woman that was in our kitchen we see everywhere we go.

**Kim Sajet:**

So how's that you've said, you know, you're a cook. But you've also demonstrated an incredible form of resistance against the status quo against bureaucracy. And the World Central Kitchen has incredible model for flexibility and ingenuity and creativity, which I think is important because we're sitting right in the middle of an art museum right now. You said I think to a group of college students, quote, "don't follow a recipe. When you go by the book, we lose our ability to be creative." When I was on a call with some of your team last week, I said, you know, I gotta say, you guys, you're like, it looks like you're flying the plane and you're building the plane at the same time. And they said yeah, and then we're doing it in a hurricane. Right? So what's the role of creativity? Is that a big part or ingenuity as you're thinking about every new crisis?

**José Andrés:**

Creativity is essential. Right? You know, I love paella which is this Spanish rice dish. And if you're my friends, you've been to Jaleo and you've eaten there paella. No, you're not my friend and what are you doing here? But can you believe we serve in the space station paella? Yeah, you should clap because I'm super proud of the moment. But now you asked me about creativity. Let me tell you what the amazing demo was in the kitchen found. That in Kyiv was one factory that produced the same technology that we use to send that paella to space and that was shut down. And we had to be feeding people sometimes in the front lines that you could not be cooking a hot meal in the traditional way. You had to be sending food that was already cook. We were able to put that factory up and running. And all of the time we are, we've been using for the last many weeks that technology to feed people in the most difficult places within the war in Ukraine. What do we learn in the pandemic? In mayhem, in disasters, life is showing us the nothing goes as planned. Therefore, if you are only teaching yourself and your teams to follow a plan, and what happens is not any part of the plans you prepare for everybody collapses, everybody freezes. We all should be embracing that chaos. We all need to start putting the plans aside and start embracing adaptation. World Central Kitchen people, men and women understand that call better than anybody, every time others freeze in the mayhem. The man and woman in a World Central Kitchen, they smile because they know it's their moment to shine.

**Kim Sajet:**

This creativity comes through in the documentary *We Feed People*. In one scene a contractor literally digs through storm debris to find some of the supplies needed to erect an emergency kitchen. Canvas for a tent, a working fan. But the documentary also highlights resilience by José, by his staff, by the people that they're feeding and it doesn't sugarcoat the heavy toll involved. More on that on the other side of the break.

[INTRO MUSIC]

On this episode of Portraits, we're talking about resistance and resilience is cooked up and served by Chef José Andrés of world central kitchen and by shero, Clara Barton. Like Clara,

José throws himself into his humanitarian work. But there are sacrifices involved too. In the documentary we feed people. We learned that José 's daughters initially joined Twitter just to keep track of their father. And we see José taking himself right to the edge of his own endurance to feed people in Puerto Rico.

**Audio Clip:**

After Hurricane Maria, he was suffering from mental and physical exhaustion. You know, I remember he just broke out. And he just, he couldn't hold it together.

**Audio Clip:**

And he came back and he was really dehydrated and low on energy, which is so unlike him, and you could see in his eyes that he he was here physically, but not emotionally, or even mentally.

**Audio Clip:**

And I think the only reason why he ended up coming back was to see a doctor.

**Kim Sajet:**

Let's get back to our conversation with José.

**José Andrés:**

You talk about me? Sure, I break down because with the big boys I have on how much hair I have in the wrong places. I'm still a very romantic in a way, how I see the world I live in, sensitive for the things that touch all of us. Optimistic, grumpy. I choose of feeding people yesterday instead of today, nor any different than I will do it in my restaurants. But at the end of the day, what gives me always hope that obviously the team that was sent are Jackie Chan who for me, they are my saints, my gods, my heroes. Obviously, my speeches, perfect when I give it the 10,000 feet above ground, and then you have people like Nate Mook, the CEO World Central Kitchen, making sure that everything happens. Yeah, you can clap. My speech is very easy when you have the man and woman at World Central Kitchen, doing God's work, responding to every eventuality in the middle of the heat. That's easy. When sometimes they say, hey, we need to feed somebody in an island. And we need the helicopters. The only thing I do is say we need helicopters.

**Kim Sajet:**

José also tipped his hat to the nonprofit pioneer Robert Eggers. He's another activist in the culinary space.

**José Andrés:**

He's a guy that told me when I was 23, 24, that philanthropy seems, is about the redemption of the giver. When philanthropy must be about the liberation of the receiver. It's okay to feel good when you give money or when you give time. But if we keep giving money, without the true return on investment, we keep throwing money at the problem. This happens in government. This happens in the private sector, sometimes, this happens in NGOs, especially the big ones. Let's make sure that when we donate our time, our heart, our brains or our money, that we make sure that we have a true return on investment. Lifting up the people that we are really trying to help. It seems that every time there is a hunger conference. Everybody that speaks is about the hungry people. Almost looks like every time we give a conference about homelessness, the people that the speaks is everybody but the people that are homeless

themselves. It's about time that we start giving voice to the people that actually we want to help. And for me going there is almost the place I can listen to what they need, not what I think they need, but what they need. We try to provide what they tell us that you want. And this is in essentially what humanitarian relief has to become.

**Kim Sajet:**

Clara Barton also responded to what people told her that they needed. She set up the Missing Soldiers Office because once word got out that she'd been treating Union soldiers on the front lines, families came to her constantly asking if she had any news of their missing loved ones. It was a big problem. There were no dog tags back then. In the end, she tracked down nearly 22,000 missing soldiers.

**David Price:**

It's the first time in America that death occurs hundreds of miles away from home.

**Kim Sajet:**

That's museum director David Price again.

**David Price:**

A lot of times they're buried in shallow graves, and you as a family member would have to travel to that Battlefield, hire a grave digger to come help you identify the body, take them home where you can mourn properly. So, there is a huge gap that she's filling, of closure of finality just so there's no unknown about your loved one.

**Kim Sajet:**

How do you think that she kind of coped with that with the huge responsibility and the sheer amount of work that was necessary to keep the operation going?

**David Price:**

Yeah, we think about that a lot. Honestly. The more we learn about her, the more, we're fascinated by her just as a human being. She writes about her time in this space. When she returns from a couple battlefields and she's so exhausted, she simply grabs a blanket and passes out on the crates that are stacked up, and passes out for like 24 hours to 36 hours just to regain her strength.

**Kim Sajet:**

Clara was so exhausted, her doctor recommended a trip to Europe to rest, but it didn't quite work out that way. She fell in with members of the International Red Cross, and ended up in the middle of the Franco Prussian war. This time, she was working with women and children who had been left starving and sometimes homeless, not on the front lines but in war ravaged cities. Her focus turned to restoring jobs and hope, not just immediate relief, it was a new approach that she learned by leaving home and rolling up her sleeves, once again, an approach that she used later to steer the American Red Cross, which she founded in 1881.

**José Andrés:**

Somebody very smart said that life, it starts at the end of your comfort zone. At the end, for me, comfort will only be achieved when we build those longer tables I'm always talking about everyday more and more. Everybody is talking about walls lately. And everybody feels like if you put a wall, all the problems go away. We know this is not true. I can put my three beautiful daughters and my wife behind a big wall. And they can have that pretense that they are going to be safer. But they do believe that the only way I'm gonna keep my daughters in a very selfish



way safe is when I build those longer tables for the daughters of other men and woman. That they only want to provide for the loved ones the same I'm trying to provide for my own. If we keep building walls, we only keep blind from the reality behind those walls. If we fight all together, building those longer tables, where I can provide not only to my daughters, but to those other daughters of people I don't know, the same hope and the same horizon. Only then I will protect my daughters. That's what I always say. Let's all build longer tables, not higher walls.

**Kim Sajet:**

You can see the documentary *We Feed People* on Disney+ and Hulu and you can find that portrait or Clara button in the show notes of this episode or on our website at [npg.si.edu](http://npg.si.edu). José's portrait, the one we commissioned, will be celebrated at our Portrait of a Nation Gala on November the 12<sup>th</sup>. Ruth Morris produced this episode. Our podcast team also includes Justin O'Neill, Ann Conanan, Deborah Sisum, Abell Berghahn and Rebecca Kasemeyer. Music is by Joe Kye and Brake Master Cylinder and our engineer is Tarek Fouda. Until next time, I'm your host Kim Sajet.