

# Beyond profit ● BY STEVE COOMES

Friday's franchisee builds business and communities with jobs, engagement

**W**hile most restaurateurs are perfecting new menus and marketing campaigns in hopes of driving sales, Daniel Halpern is focused on spurring the sputtering U.S. economy.

"If America doesn't have a thriving middle class, I have no customers," said Halpern, president and chief executive of Jackmont Hospitality Inc., an Atlanta-based franchisee of 11 T.G.I. Friday's restaurants. "Most of my customers are working-class people, so if we continue to lose jobs that employ middle-class wage earners, my customers will disappear."

As if overseeing Jackmont weren't challenging enough, Halpern spends a good deal of time furthering the causes and candidates backed by the Democratic National Committee, or DNC. During the 2008 presidential election, he was the Southeast regional finance chair, a key operative who marshaled funds and voter support for President Barack Obama. Recently, Obama asked Halpern to serve on the 11-member Corporation for Travel Promotion, which markets the United States as an international tourist destination.

"Tourism is a huge piece of business in our country, and every time a visitor comes here, it helps create jobs," said Halpern, who also is a member of the DNC's executive committee. "I'm trying to promote the country to get people here and stimulate the economy and create jobs. That's a long-term solution."

Despite the grand scale of some of his causes, Halpern also

## DANIEL HALPERN

**TITLE:** president, CEO, founding principal, Jackmont Hospitality Inc.

**BRANDS:** T.G.I. Friday's, One Flew South

**UNIT COUNT:** 12

**ANNUAL REVENUE:** \$60 million

**HOMETOWN:** Atlanta

**BIRTH DATE:** Jan. 28, 1963

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor of Science, Cornell School of Hotel Administration

**KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** service on the Democratic National Committee, work with the Maynard Jackson Youth Foundation

**PERSONAL:** wife, Sonya; two sons, Geoffrey Francis and Nathaniel James

**FAVORITE SAYING:** "Do good and do well."

**HOBBIES:** spending time with family

is focused on smaller ones with more immediate impacts, such as helping the communities in which Jackmont's restaurants operate. Except for two Friday's housed in airports, all of Jackmont's Friday's are located in urban areas commonly disregarded by restaurateurs.

"Part of our mission is trying to improve the quality of life in these places I call food deserts," said Halpern. "Our main purpose there is to invest capital, create jobs and get returns, but it's also worked out well from a social aspect."

Jackmont restaurants are intended to be much more than dining stops, he said. They're community destinations for civic and religious groups, which are encouraged to use their facilities for meetings at Jackmont's expense.



Brooke Jackson Edmond and Daniel Halpern, seated, first met as students at Cornell and later launched Jackmont Hospitality together.

And while that strategy isn't uncommon in the restaurant business, Halpern says applying them successfully in urban communities takes culturally savvy operators who know the territory. "You can imagine why some

businesses choose not to go into those markets, but in fairness you have to ask whether your company culturally understands how to deal with those markets," Halpern said. "If you look at the makeup of our company, we em-

ploy people who grew up in the areas where we have restaurants. You have to have people who know how to deal in those areas."

Or more simply put, "We see those neighborhoods as places with people who look like us," said Brooke Jackson Edmond, senior vice president of Jackmont. "I also think Daniel just feels comfortable establishing businesses in the communities we're in."

### Not afraid of work

Halpern experienced cultural diversity at a young age as a Native American growing up in a predominantly African American Atlanta neighborhood. His first employer was a Chinese restaurateur who hired him to wash dishes at age 14.

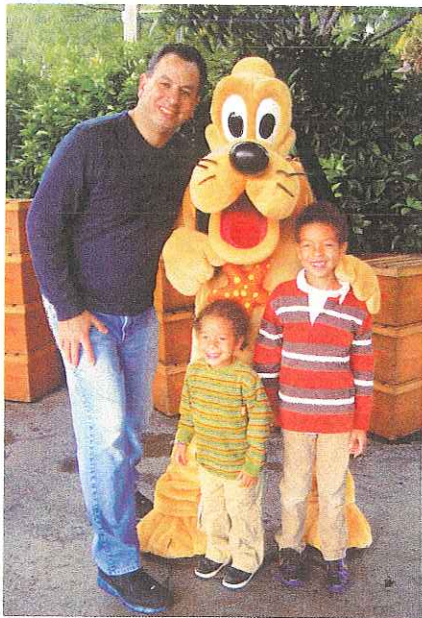
"That was Mr. Chu, and he was nice enough to give me a job when I was that young," said Halpern. "He worked the brakes off of me, but I got a paycheck every week."

He said his family wasn't poor, but that "my parents gave us only what we needed, not what we always wanted. I wanted my own money, and the restaurant business was the easiest point of entry to achieving that."

Halpern took his interest in restaurants to Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, where he earned a bachelor's degree. While there, he met Edmond, and the two Georgians became friends. Years later, while working in college dining for Gourmet Services, he approached her about starting a restaurant business together.

"He was always ambitious and persistent, and I knew he had a good idea, but we needed capital," said Edmond. The pair approached her father, Maynard Jackson, three-time mayor of Atlanta and owner of Jackson Securities, an investment firm. He signed on as a partner, along with Brenda Branch, Jackmont's vice president of operations.

"My father wasn't active in our business, but he connected



us to people who could help us," Edmond said.

Jackmont Hospitality was founded in 1994 and opened its first T.G.I. Friday's in Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. And though it was a success from the start, the company wanted to "get out onto the street" to have an impact on minority communities, Halpern said. Their first community restaurant opened in District Heights, Md.

"We hired 160 people there but had over 1,000 apply," Halpern said, reflecting on the community's profound need. "That was the first time I recall having something like 15 or 20 people come to me and thank [me] for giving them a job."

Jackmont now has Friday's units in Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, in addition to a growing campus, corporate and health-care feeding business. That level of success in minority communities has made Jackmont's stores models for the rest of the T.G.I. Friday's system, said Lee Sanders, president of domestic franchising for the brand.

"His willingness to take the Friday's brand into markets where others might not go is a driver of the current thinking that Friday's fits in every market, with every consumer group," Sanders said. "Daniel is not risk averse. He understands the diverse guest base, he is a



**Above: Daniel Halpern, known for his community engagement, is shown at one of Jackmont's T.G.I. Friday's restaurants.**

**Left, from left: Halpern with sons Nathaniel and Geoffrey, while on vacation**

master at community engagement, and he is a pioneer at heart."

Clyde Williams, who recently stepped down as national political director for the DNC, said Halpern's instincts for partnering with the right people have made him a significant mover and shaker.

"He's a natural," Williams said. "He easily navigates any crowd of people, whether they're black or white or in urban or rural communities. Daniel is not overly partisan and not an ideologue. He works well with both Democrats and Republicans, and I'm sure that ability to get along with everyone is part of his success in the hospitality business."

Phil Hickey, chairman of O'Charley's, became friends with Halpern when the two served on the boards of the Georgia Restaurant Association and the National Restaurant Association. He said Halpern is truly committed to serving minority communities, but "you can't overlook the fact that Jackmont Hospitality is successful because they're good business people. They have a good brand, they pick good sites, and they run them very well."

Plus, said Edmond, Halpern

works very hard. When the company began, she said there were many Sundays when Halpern would call her at 7:30 a.m. and expect her to come in to work for the full day.

"There were lots of times back then when we prayed, 'Oh, I hope he gets a girlfriend to slow him down,'" said Edmond.

That has happened some, she said, since Halpern married and fathered two sons.

"Every stage he reaches in his personal life, he's lightened up more and more," Edmond said. "But Daniel is just motivated. He's that entrepreneurial thinker who has that spirit of accomplishing a mission, and he won't stop until it's completed." ■



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