

TENDING TO BUSINESS

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DEMAREST PIZZERIA A SLICE OF NORTHERN VALLEY LIFE

BY JOSEPH RITACCO
Special Sections

For most high school seniors, dancing the night away at the senior prom, autographing yearbooks and donning a cap and gown for commencement are the activities that define the final weeks of the school year.

One member of Northern Valley Regional High School's class of 1987, however, somehow found time amidst the celebration to become an entrepreneur.

Steve Renke was introduced to the pizza industry as a high school freshman, doing dishes and prep work at a pizzeria in Norwood. Before long, he was helping customers, cooking pies and closing up the store. By his senior year, he, along with the owner and manager of the establishment, decided to form a partnership and buy a new business of their own, Demarest Pizzeria.

The timing of the deal, in fact, required a note from Renke's attorney, excusing him from school to attend the closing.

"We bought the store and it opened the following week," he recalls. "I graduated and began working full-time."

Within two years, he bought out his two partners and took over full control of the business, implementing changes along the way which allowed it to thrive in an evolving market. One of the most significant changes, in fact, was to the

name itself. Originally called Caesar's Pizza, a threat of a lawsuit from Little Caesars prompted a switch to Pizza Express. Finally, in August of 2009, the store was renamed Demarest Pizzeria.

"Pizza Express didn't really scream, 'catering,'" said Renke. "At the time, it was just basic pizza and sandwiches. As the catering business evolved, I felt we had an untapped market."

The decision to emphasize catering facilitated changes to the menu, highlighted by the addition of a variety of salads and dinner specials. Pizza lovers, however, can still choose from a variety of pies, said Renke, ranging from the traditional cheese and pepperoni to barbecue chicken, buffalo chicken and taco pizzas.

"We're full-service," he said. "You can order a full tray of chicken francese or a slice of pizza and garlic knots."

Demarest Pizzeria recently made further changes to its menu, adding whole wheat dough, whole wheat penne and gluten-free pizza.

The business also maintains a strong presence within the community. Renke has instituted pre-paid charge accounts, enabling children to stop by after school and charge their purchases to accounts set up by their parents. The pizzeria also hosts snack stands at local baseball games and swim clubs.

"It's a great way to get to know the



STAFF PHOTO BY JOE CAMPOREALE

During his 24 years of ownership, which began just a few weeks shy of his high school graduation, Steve Renke has worked hard to make Demarest Pizzeria part of the fabric of the community.

parents and kids," said Renke. "We meet some kids when they're in sixth grade, and then they come back years later with children of their own."

Demarest Pizzeria is located at 130 Hardenburgh Ave. in Demarest. The

store is open Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 10 p.m. For more information about the pizzeria, call 201-768-8030 or visit www.demarestpizzeria.com.

GENTLEMENS AGREEMENT IMPROVE YOUR LOOK FROM HEAD TO TOE

BY JOSEPH RITACCO
Special Sections

If the clothes do in fact make the man, then Sandi Zahn has played a role in shaping many a man's winning look.

Zahn, owner of Gentlemens Agreement, an Englewood-based all men's consignment store, maintains an inventory of clothing that can dress any customer from head to toe.

She described the store's creation as a "fluke," resulting from a friendly conversation she once had with a neighbor.

"My friend showed me her husband's clothing," Zahn recalls, "and asked me what she should do with it. I told her, 'Don't do anything with it,' and I started looking for a store the next day."

Zahn, who worked in wholesale women's clothing for 20 years, did not know of any all men's clothing stores, and thought such a business could find a niche within the community.

Admittedly, she was very naïve when she began, relying mostly on friends and a modest advertising campaign to generate business. The key to success, she determined, was the quality of the clothing, which she insisted had to be stylish and in tip-top condition.

"I'm very particular," she said. "I sell

designer-quality clothing. This is not a thrift shop."

The store boasts an impressive roster of designers which includes Gianni Versace, Hugo Boss, Giorgio Armani, Ralph Lauren, Perry Ellis, Tommy Hilfiger, Marc Jacobs and Hickey Freeman.

Longevity has validated her approach, as Gentlemens Agreement recently marked its 16th year in business.

Zahn knows her customers on a first-name basis, enabling her to provide personalized service. Some of her customers, she said, come in as frequently as once a week. She'll often call a particular customer when a new article of clothing arrives that she thinks he might like.

"It's very much a mom-and-pop store," said Zahn.

Suits, she said, are the store's biggest seller, given how expensive they can be in the bigger department stores.

Most of the store's consignors are retirees or men who no longer fit into old clothing due to weight loss.

Zahn maintains a 50/50 partnership with all consignors.

All clothing, she said, must be brought to her, as experience has taught her not to make anymore house calls.

"People would assure me they had great



STAFF PHOTO BY COLLEEN WHITE

Sandi Zahn, owner of the Englewood-based all men's consignment store, Gentlemens Agreement, turned a chance conversation with a friend into a successful business enterprise.

clothes," she recalls with a laugh, "but when I went out there they'd show me some old polyester suits."

Such lessons, however, has strengthened her business, one which she hopes will continue well into the future.

"As long as my health allows, I'll be around," said Zahn. "I'm not one to stay home."

Gentlemens Agreement is located at 20 North Van Brunt St. in Englewood. The store is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Thursday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information about the business, call 201-568-5511 or visit www.gentlemensagreement.net.