

In Good Times And In Bad, Family Businesses Are There

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This week's spotlight shines on Tierney's Tavern and Keil's Pharmacy. Though they are located at opposite ends of Valley Road (Tierney's at 136-138 Valley Road and Keil's at 732 Valley Road), they have a common origin, opening up shop during the early years of the Great Depression. They're both planning changes to keep up with the times. The youngest generation working at both businesses - Bill Tierney and Andrew Keil - met their wives - Vicky and Donna, respectively - at their family establishments.

Most of all, they both plan to be around for another 65 years.

The histories of Keil's Pharmacy and Tierney's Tavern are inextricably linked with the history of the Great Depression here in Essex County.

Keil's Pharmacy was founded when Herman Keil couldn't afford a store in the "big, booming economic centers like Newark and East Orange," said Herman's son, Stuart Keil. "He had to go out to the country, and back then, Upper Montclair was the country.

"It was tough to do business during the Depression and during the war [World War II]. But it developed a neighborhood camaraderie, because they all went through hard times together."

More recent hard times - flooding from Hurricane Floyd last September - showed Stuart's son, Andrew, just how faithful the family's clientele is.

"There was a person in the middle of the street picking up our merchandise to make sure we'd get credit from the insurance company," said Andrew. "People sent us letters of support. It made me look at this business much differently."

Apparently, it's the service that keeps customers coming back. The pharmacy is open seven days a week, and delivers prescriptions all over town.

"We cater more to what our local customers would like," Stuart said. That's why Keil's still carries Coke syrup (an old-fashioned nausea remedy) just as it always has. Other special services are offered by Stuart's wife, Mona, a Lancome-trained cosmetologist, and his son, Andrew, who is certified by the National Board of Orthotics to fit braces and other medical devices.

"We do house calls to do a fitting," said Andrew. "A lot of things - canes, crutches, lift chairs, Reid sleeves, commodes - have options [our customers may] not have considered. I go there to talk with them about their needs and help them choose what's going to be best for them in the long run. Our customers are our friends and neighbors, not just customers."

"They are our priority," agreed his wife, Donna Iannuzzelli. "We're able to take the time to talk with Mrs. Smith for five minutes because the baby's sick and she's worried. We also do a lot of compounding by hand, making up dermatological creams and capsules for babies on a daily basis. The chains are filling so many prescriptions, they'll always turn away special orders like that."

The pharmacy caters to their customers in non-medical ways, as well. The Keils are expanding the gift section for the holiday season ("Christmas is going to be grand here," Stuart said). Also, "due to popular demand," the Keils gave some space inside the store to Uptown Deli, when the popular nosh nook lost its home next door due to the Schweppe Realtors' expansion.

"I'd like to see our business be an advocate for our customers, a support group and helping hand for the community," said Andrew. "That's why we go the extra mile. This is my life. I'd like to serve the community forever - or as long as they'll have us!"

As for Tierney's Tavern, rumor has it that it actually began before Prohibition was repealed in 1933. Ed Tierney began a speakeasy (an illegal bar dispensing bootlegged whiskey) behind a Valley road candy store "that was quite popular," said Vicky Tierney. But their menu states "that was just hearsay."

After Ed died in 1947, the torch was passed to his brothers, Bill and Jim. The next generation in the business was Bill's son, Edward, and nephew, Art. Art has since passed away and Edward has retired. When their turn came up, Edward's son, Bill Tierney, and his Irish wife, Vicky, almost didn't go into the family business.

"The successful Tierneys are not in the bar business," joked Bill. "My wife and I were leaving for Ireland. I was going to interview for a job with Budweiser over there. But Grandma Kay (the late Bill's wife) said she'd give me her stock in the bar if I came back home and ran the business and took care of her until she passed away. The deal was made on a hug and a kiss."

Vicky still remembers when the business was emotionally bequeathed to them, at one of the tavern's anniversary parties.

"It was one of the last times Grandma made it upstairs," said Bill. "Grandma Kay took Vicky's hand and told her, 'You're going to take my place.' There were some tears."

"I realized what's been handed down to me," said Vicky. "That's why we run a straight-up bar, so we can pass it on to the kids. We want it to stay in the family."

In addition to their weekend jazz, rock and blues shows in the upstairs bar, the Tierneys plan to expand the downstairs bar. Adding on an upscale dining room next door, they'll be serving filet mignon along with Grandma Kay's home recipes for clam chowder and other family favorites.

Bill and Vicky's children - Sarah, Danny and Gracie - do chores around the bar, like helping in the kitchen, cleaning the parking lot, and filling the ketchup and mustard bottles to earn their allowance.

"That was my job when I was his age," said Bill of bottle-filling duty.

Talking about the future, Vicky noted that there's a study that says the chances for a family business going under are greatest in the third generation.

"The reason why the [tavern] can go on is my folks knew when to let go," said Bill. "I think that's why so many family businesses fail. The older generation doesn't know when to let go. A lot of times, they don't want to remove the training wheels."

Vicky added, "We want to keep it going another 60 years."