

Career choice caters to chef's talents and tastes

By **Susan Frick Carlman**
STAFF WRITER

It was time to step off the corporate fast track; that much was clear to Karen Garlough and her husband Bill. After some 15 years in the realm of Fortune-100 companies, they both had an appetite for something new.

"Bill had more of a specialty-foods background, and we knew a lot of people in the industry, we had gone to a lot of trade shows, and we enjoyed it, so we thought that would be a good business for us," said Garlough, 53, a primary organizer of last weekend's Cuisine for a Cause fundraiser for Naperville CARES, and half of the spousal team that today owns and runs My Chef Catering in Naperville.

When the pair opened their gourmet deli and catering business at 75th Street and Rickert Drive in 1989, it was a little ahead of its time, serving up specialty foods and take-home dinners from their storefront operation well before Boston Market came to town. But within a few short years, it was the catering piece that had risen to the top.



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My Chef Catering co-owner Karen Garlough samples a sauce created by executive chef Dave Opielinski, right, in the kitchen of the Naperville catering and event company on Thursday. Garlough has more than 17 years in the business, which caters for social and corporate events.

Q: So how did you wind up where you are today?**A:** Especially when you're in a new business, you do what you need to do to pay the bills, and especially to make your payroll, so what we did was we went the way of catering, because that was what was really driving the business. When we moved here (on Golfview Drive in the northwest corner of the city), which was about 10 years ago, at that point the retail sales were like five percent of the total business, so it was really a no-brainer.

Q: Do you think it was the right time, the right place?**A:** Yes. We had a little apprehension, just because people would come in – we had a lot of walk-in traffic, and that did translate to some catering sales – but really, it didn't miss a beat.

Q: How did food figure into your growing-up time in Michigan?

A: I was fortunate enough that my parents would save up some money and take us to some nice restaurants, so that we were exposed to different cuisines. Occasionally we would go downtown to Detroit for dinner.

Q: What about at home?

A: I did some cooking and baking, with my grandmother. She was the baker of the group. So I really spent some time on that, and also with my other grandmother (who) was from Germany – both my grandparents came over from Germany, in the '20s – and I did learn from her things like making homemade spaetzle, German potato salad, saurbraten and things like that. Looking back, that was interesting. My other grandmother was more traditional, kind of meat and potatoes, but no real passion for it.

Q: What is it like to make a living helping people celebrate?

A: It is a happy business. It's hospitality, and what's fun about it, especially at this point, is that it's a generational thing, where we've done the graduation parties for the kids, and then we did their weddings, and we did their showers, and now we're doing their kids' baptisms and confirmations. It's like old friends. They call you. There's a prominent family in town that I've done both of their kids' weddings and their birthday parties, his birthday and I just did her birthday last weekend. And it's great, because they call you and it's "Karen, help me with my party." It's wonderful. It's also a little different – catering's a little different in that it can be more creative than some of the other areas of hospitality, because we do a party in your home or at your office or at a banquet hall, and you have the opportunity really to create the ambiance. So that's what's kind of fun, too.

Q: You do more than just the business these days.

A: We do, and that's been nice ... just having a little more time these past five years, we've really been able to broaden our perspectives. When you have your own business, it's all-consuming. You start out and you're working 16 hours a day. And this business is a seven-day-a-week business. The train is on the track all the time, and it just chugs along; it is all-consuming. So a couple things that we did so that it wasn't 24 hours a day ... was we got some dogs – we don't have any kids, so we didn't have that distraction – and the dogs were terrific. It was a reason to go home, and it was something to take care of. And these last five years we've been able to get involved in community things. Probably my strongest tie is with Naperville CARES, which I absolutely love. They're a wonderful group. They have a mission, but they have fun getting there, (and) it's personally rewarding, because it gives you different perspectives, too. At first glance, when you think of anybody being in economic stress – which CARES does – in Naperville, you think, "Oh, that can't be." And of course it is.

Q: How do you deal with the prospect of burnout, or is it not a problem for you?

A: You do get burned out. It's so demanding, timewise. A lot of times we nickname it Just In Time Catering, because sometimes you're getting the things out today that need to get out. So you do, and you get into a bit of a slump because you tend to do the same things that you know are tried and true.

But when you have a lot of repeat customers, they don't want to do the same thing they did last year for their holiday party or whatever, so what's good about it is that we do take some time to read magazines, even the Food Channel – there's some fabulous things on there, it's fun. And just talk to people, too, in the industry. And we do occasionally go to a trade show. Even just going down to Chinatown and poking around the little Asian grocery stores and things, you do get some ideas. We spent about a week in New York and hadn't been there in a long time, and just took pictures of all these beautiful displays ... we were all pumped up when we came home. It was great, because all of a sudden it was "Let's do this." What's good about in here, too, is that we kind of keep one another pumped up. When Dominick (Scafidi, a partner in the business) will come back from an event and show some photographs, or I'll stop by one of his weddings, let's say over at Danada, and see how gorgeous it is, it does get you pumped up again. So it's a pretty high-energy place.

Q: What's your favorite thing about coming to work every day?

A: I guess it's the camaraderie in here (and) the interaction with everyone in here. ... that's one of the reasons why people have stayed so long.

Q: There seems to have been a turning point for you about five years ago.

A: We did slow down, I think it was five years ago, almost to the date, that Bill had congestive heart failure. ... he's healthy now, (but) within that five years I had cancer, and that's fine now. That was a big surprise, because I'd never been sick except for an occasional cold. I'd never been in the hospital, and then all of a sudden – boom. So when that happens, your perspective changes in that you start to feel the mortality, even though you feel fairly young. So that was probably the turning point. It was like, "Well, we better start living a little bit."

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