

COMMENT

Cooking up success out of desperation

It was a frantic Saturday morning as Marilyn Tunkey reviewed her checklists and deployed her forces. Let's see now: 300 for a spectacular buffet lunch highlighted by a pasta salad with chicken and curry, 40 for a sidown business luncheon featuring tomatoes laden with lobster salad and 60 for an elegant cocktail party, heavy on the hors d'oeuvres.

And the tablecloths and napkins didn't get delivered? Where do you locate such items 90 minutes before showtime on a Saturday morning?

How's that for a busy day in the kitchen?

It wasn't always that way. Just a few years ago, she spent most Saturday mornings making breakfast for her family and some Saturday mornings wondering where her own next meal would be coming from.

That was before the days of Marilyn Tunkey Caterer. Those were the days of Marilyn Tunkey, mother of three with little work experience, whose marriage had just ended and who needed a job to keep her family together.

In the intervening years, Tunkey, 39, has transformed herself from a desperate ex-wife unable to find work and uncertain of her own capabilities to one of Buffalo's busiest party planners and caterers.

She now heads a business which she inaugurated by giving away free pies to create customer interest. Last year she had sales of over \$200,000 and that figure will easily be surpassed in 1986.

Meanwhile, she has moved her center of operations from the small kitchen of her Eggertsville home to 2508 Main St. and acquired some major-league kitchen equipment. She is now poised to open momentarily Take Out Marilyn, an upscale food takeout center next door at 2506 Main St.

"When I have the time to stop and think about this," she said, "I do find it very difficult to believe all of this has happened. I've been very lucky but I've also had the support of some good friends and good customers. I've never done any advertising, either; it has all been word-of-mouth.

"I mean in the beginning I was desperate. I had to have a job. I never thought of myself as a cook. I would have taken any job. I tried to get a job wrapping packages in a department store and they wouldn't hire me."



BFLO. TALES

Dick Hirsch

Now Tunkey does her own hiring, retains her own attorney, accountant, bookkeeper and has a full-time staff of five and a part-time staff which often is more than 50.

Her business, started in desperation, has grown to the point where her schedule is filled with corporate receptions, cocktail suppers, gallery openings, weddings, bar mitzvahs, luncheons, business breakfasts, you name it. She has attended classes at the Culinary Institute of America, perfected her skills as a chef and learned that she can run a business.

Her start was dismal. She was a housewife and her marriage was over. There were piles of bills. And she had little work experience. She says she was a candidate for the welfare rolls.

Instead, she developed into one of the great success stories of the Displaced Homemakers program of the Everywoman Opportunity Center, founded to counsel unskilled women attempting to enter the job market. Tunkey visited the center, received counseling and eventually made contact with Virginia Maiman, then a counselor at the center.

"All the people there were absolutely great to me. They encouraged me and gave me the support I needed," she recalled.

Maiman remembers that Tunkey frequently would mention how much she enjoyed cooking at home. So they began to discuss the possibility of cooking as a vocation.

"All I can say is it was like watching a flower open and blossom," Maiman said. "It started slowly, baking pies and doing small luncheons and dinners, but she made it grow. If anything, Marilyn has a tendency to give too much credit to people who advised and supported her. Really, she did it herself."

The business started in 1980 when the primary assignment was to generate

enough income to support herself and the three boys. She started a business called "Painted Pies and Such," and offered to supply free cakes and pies to some boutiques if the proprietors would pass out her business cards and recommend her cooking.

From that enterprise she developed some business, baking and catering bridge luncheons and other small parties. She also developed a coterie of loyalists who gave her repeat business and recommended her to others.

"I swear some of them had parties just to give me the job because they knew I needed the money," she said.

Now she rarely undertakes small parties and often is booked well in advance for corporate events and the usual variety of social affairs. Since the catering business can be cyclical—it is usually so quiet you can hear a sponge cake drop during January, February and March—she is opening the takeout food business. She is hopeful it will add new volume and stabilize the sales curve by keeping things busy during slow catering periods.

"I guess I was always an intuitive cook and a natural baker," she said, "but when I began attending the classes and meeting chefs from some of the great hotels, I realized that often I knew as much as they did."

She shows no menu to prospective clients because she has none. Instead, she displays a portfolio of photos of various dishes and tables she has prepared and designed. Then they discuss likes and dislikes and Tunkey suggests the menu and quotes prices.

The hallmark of her work is that the food not only tastes great, it looks great. She believes the two qualities are of equal importance and her tables always seem to be set and dishes presented with considerable flair.

"Sometimes I think I could have been an actress. Some friends tell me I have a dramatic style and should have been an actress. But I'm a caterer. A caterer. Can you believe that? Sometimes when I say that word I still can't believe what has happened to me."

Dick Hirsch, businessman and columnist, writes *Bflo. Tales* weekly for *Business First* and claims to be Buffalo's youngest veteran journalist.