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Career makeover

Lawyer satisfies hunger with deli

■ U-M alum had itch to get back into kitchen so he took over parents' W. Bloomfield eatery.

BY BRIAN J. O'CONNOR
The Detroit News

Steve Goldberg came of age in a time when a suburban Detroit kid could grow up to be anything he wanted: a doctor or a lawyer.

So, after years spent in and around his family's Stage Deli restaurant, he graduated from high school, headed off to the University of Michigan and quickly picked law.

"I was pretty good at cutting corned beef, but cutting abdomens would have been another story," Goldberg, 50, jokes.

After U-M law school, Goldberg established himself as a tax attorney in Los Angeles, but never got away from the kitchen, even completing the culinary arts program at UCLA for fun.

So it wasn't a total surprise that, when it came time for his parents to give up the West Bloomfield deli, Goldberg took over.

"It's really about doing what I love," said the West Bloomfield resident. "I had done law for a long time, but I always had that itch to get back in the restaurant business, and I was fortunate to have that opportunity."

Where he came from: Goldberg got started at an early age in his parents' deli.

"I used to stand on a crate to reach the countertop and wash dishes for 50 cents an hour," he recalls. "One of my great joys was to collect my paycheck each week, take it to the bank and get my passbook stamped to show my extra \$3.50."

Goldberg worked in the business all through high school and some of his college years. After finishing law school, he took a year off to be a ski bum, then started practicing in Los Angeles.

Unlike a lot of career changers, he didn't dislike his job at all.

"I loved practicing law," he notes. "I was very good at it, I was in an enjoyable practice, but restaurants and food and hospitality was in my blood."

What changed: By 1994, Goldberg had been practicing tax law for a decade and was getting ready to be married. At the same time, his parents were ready to give up the deli, partly due to his father's health. With one major life change in the works, it seemed like a good time to make more.

"I was getting married and it just seemed to fit," he explains. "Move back to Michigan, raise a family and take over the restaurant and pursue that career."

Moment of truth: Although it seems like a natural decision now, making the move back to Michigan was a difficult one. Goldberg says his very deliberative approach to decision-making didn't help move things along. Instead, his fiancée moved him along. "If it wasn't for her I'd still be worrying and evaluating the options in Los Angeles," he admits.

Stumbling blocks: One is the volatile nature of the restaurant business itself, Goldberg says. "The business changes every year — there's more competition and more pressure on margins."

For himself, the challenge has been learning the hospitality side of the business as its owner.

"I'm a very good technician, but I needed to develop my 'bedside manner,'" he admits. "It's taken 10 years to do it."

In the meantime, he's also expanded the menu with healthier selections like vegetarian fare and salads. He's also expanded the business, which includes satellite locations in Somerset Collection in Troy, Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi and Goldberg's Famous Delicatessen in Seattle.

Rather than overwhelming him, that expansion has helped him create a more flexible approach to work and life.

"Ironically, because it required me to be more disciplined in creating an organization and delegating responsibility and being more removed from the day-to-day operations, I can be focusing on big-picture kinds of issues," he notes.

"With good systems in place,

Steve Goldberg

Home: West Bloomfield; married with a 9-year-old daughter and 17- and 24-year-old sons

Born: Detroit, 1956

Education: Southfield-Lathrup High School, 1973; University of Michigan, 1977; U-M law school, 1980

Old career: Tax attorney

New career: Restaurant owner

well-incentivized employees and ongoing training, I think it's possible to get there without living and breathing the restaurant night and day."

Words of wisdom: The first thing is to know what you're doing, Goldberg says. "The reason I can be successful is that I know every facet of the business inside out," he explains. "Most people open up a restaurant and they're gone in six months. It's really true of every business: You need to know everything about it or you need to hire people who know everything about it. Otherwise, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

Beyond the business, Goldberg cautions against not taking risks.

"My main advice is that life is short, too short for you to do just one thing. If you really love something and go for it, if it doesn't work out, try something else. It's about having the freedom and allowing yourself to try new things."



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"Restaurants and food and hospitality was in my blood," says Steve Goldberg.