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Central Ky. Captain D's owners 'living the American dream'

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Elfrieda Benes and her daughter and business partner Jarka Wells own Captain D's restaurants in Winchester and Richmond.
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WINCHESTER — This isn't your average fish tale. Separated during World War II, a Czech family immigrates to the United States and bands together to open and run Captain D's restaurants in Richmond and Winchester for more than three decades. Along the way, the tight-knit group shares in the constant work that comes with running restaurants, the joys that come with their successes and the struggles that come with the death of the family patriarch.

"I feel like I'm living the American dream," said Jarka Wells, who now runs the day-to-day operations of the restaurants as the proverbial right hand of her mother. "I came to America when I was 7 with my family with just two suitcases."

Coming to America

Wells is at the center of the family operation at the fast-food fish restaurants in the two Central Kentucky cities. But there's the long shadow of her parents, Jerry and Elfrieda Benes, that begin the tale.

During World War II, Elfrieda and her sister were separated from their mother, who married an American soldier in Germany. Twenty-six years later, the Red Cross told the family they had found the mother in Gallatin, Tenn., running a nursing home. The sisters' families — including Jerry and Jarka (pronounced yarka), who was a child — received permission from the then-Communist government of Czechoslovakia to travel to America for a reunion that was front-page news in Tennessee.

"We couldn't speak English," Jarka Wells recalled. "On the plane, the stewardesses were practicing with us to say words like 'yes' and 'no,' 'I love you,' and 'How are you?'"

"And 'thank you,'" Elfrieda Benes added as she and her daughter sat in a booth at their Winchester restaurant last month.

The family's visit to America was supposed to last three months. Instead, American authorities allowed the families, desperate to be permanently reunited, to stay in Tennessee, and they became American citizens.

The father, Jerry Benes, went to work doing anything he could, from washing cars to making concrete mixers. But it was an early 1970s newspaper ad for a management job at the young Captain D's seafood chain, founded in 1969, that would change his life.

The burgeoning Nashville-based company hired him as an assistant manager at a restaurant there. As the years passed, he became the manager, and his family joined him working at the restaurant — something they would do for decades to come.



"I've been involved since I was 13," Wells said. "I had started going into the store with Dad illegally before then, and the supervisors were like, 'Jerry, you can't do that. We have laws here.'"

"At 13, I was able to get a work permit."

And that began Wells' career as a jack-of-all-trades while her mother "was his fish cutter" and her sister, Simona, worked in the dining room.

Elfrieda Benes recalled, "When we went over the step to get to Captain D's, he was not my husband. He was my boss."

It was a lesson Wells learned quickly, too.

"I'll never forget one time that the phone rang. I answered it and we were busy, busy, busy, and I said, 'Dad, phone,'" Wells said. "After it slowed down, Dad took me back to the office, and said, 'Here, I'm not Dad. I'm your boss, Jerry.'"

"Dad was very good at being able to separate business from family. His rule was, 'If I let you slide with something, the other employees are going to expect that.' We were not allowed to get by with anything because we were supposed to be examples."

Coming to Kentucky

Within a few years, Jerry had risen to become a troubleshooter for the company, traveling from restaurant to restaurant to get them shipshape. In the late 1970s, he got the chance to practice what he preached to the various restaurant managers: Two partners made him an offer to help open a store in Richmond. In November 1981, the trio opened a second store in Winchester.

Within a few years, though, Jerry was about to be on his own. The partners joked about selling, and "Jerry said, if you want to sell them, I'm buying," Elfrieda recalled.

With the help of two new partners, Jerry amassed about \$1 million to buy the two stores. He became sole owner of both within six years.

The one constant throughout the change was the work.

"I didn't get to participate in any school function because, right away, at 16, I was Dad's assistant manager," Wells said. "After graduating from high school in 1979, I was the manager here in Winchester."

Rather than going to college, she continued working at the restaurants.

"There was no time and no money," Wells said. "It was work, work, work. But we always had really good vacations."

Those included trips to visit their family in Czechoslovakia and, after that country was divided, the Czech Republic.

You wouldn't detect her Czech past from hearing Wells, though. "Everyone asks, where's my accent?" she said.

But while she lost hers, Jerry's strong one never waned.

"Customers would always say, 'Jerry, where are you from?' " she said. "He would say, 'I'm from Richmond, where are you?' They would say, 'No, where are you born?' And he would say right back, 'Oh, you didn't ask me that.' "

Coming back to Captain D's

In the mid-'80s, Wells did something unheard-of: She left Captain D's.

She moved to Powell County after marrying and got out of the business, even working at Cintas for two years.

"When you do something your whole life, you actually wind up missing it," she said.



By 1987, she was back as a relief manager two nights a week, and her father had bigger plans. When her second husband was in need of a job, he asked Jerry for work.

"He said, 'Only if you get Jarka to come back full-time,' " Wells said.

And sure enough, she did, in 1998. By this time Jerry was teaching her the behind-the-scenes operations.

"In the year or two before his death, he still did things as far as the insurance and the finances and the co-op meetings with the company," Wells said. "When he passed away in 2004, it was really scary."

The family was faced with a choice: sell the restaurants to the company or try to take the patriarch's place.

Elfrieda recalled Wells telling her, "Mom, we'll try it."

And Wells did.

"She had everything," Elfrieda said. "I couldn't go in the stores for two years because it was too much pain and memories."

Wells turned to the leaders of the Lexington Captain D's who have franchised operations in Kentucky and Ohio.

Tom Sims, who had trained with Jerry Benes in Nashville, and Lowell Hughes offered advice on buying products, managing costs and so forth.

"It's great to have good neighbors like that in the franchise community," Hughes said. "They're great ambassadors of the brand."

With their help, the family kept things going, only to be confronted by the great recession.

"The first place customers started cutting back was eating out," Wells said.

Coming into their own

Today, though, business is back up, Wells said.

"I'm thankful that we survived," she said. "Hopefully, we're doing something right to keep our doors open."

It's a culture of good service and tasty food that's kept longtime customers, including Winchester residents Ernest and Ann Sorrell, or "Unsweet" and "Sweet" as the staff calls them because of their tea preferences.

"We've been coming to this Captain D's since 1992 because the food's good, the service is good and everybody treats us nice," Ernest Sorrell said.

And customer feedback makes its way to corporate headquarters in Nashville, too, where leaders like to brag on the family.

"They're a fine example of a father and mom passing the restaurant on to their children and being successful," said Bill Nelson, vice president of franchise operations. "And they continue to be successful with running good restaurants there."

There might be a third location coming to the family operation.

"That is actually my goal and ambition," Wells said. She's asked the company for permission to open a restaurant in Mount Sterling. The company, though, thinks the presence of a Long John Silver's there might mean one too many fish restaurants for a small town, she said.

"They're pushing me to do Morehead, but to me, I think there's every restaurant there already," Wells said. "I'm wanting Mount Sterling, but I understand their point."

And she's already eyeing the family that will carry on after her. Her daughter Kristi Haydon is the dining room supervisor in Winchester, and her younger son Shawn Drake has started working some on weekends.

Elfrieda Benes likens Captain D's to her family, and Wells said with two daughters and grandchildren involved, she's on target.

"Because of our family ties that we've kept, we've made it as a family in this franchise," Wells said. "I don't feel that my father would have been able to do it without my mom and me. And I wouldn't be able to do it without my mom and my sister."

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