

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS: Local Greek restaurant celebrates 44 years of operation, ownership kept in family

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Copy Editor

With the popularity of restaurant chains, it's not always easy to find a family-owned business where the owners are mother and child. But for Greek restaurant Acropolis on North Eugene Street in downtown Greensboro, this is nothing new.

Beginnings

Jimmy Contogiannis began his career in the restaurant business as a child. His parents, Eleni and Gus, opened their first restaurant "The Boston Café" in 1967, when he was 10. The restaurant served Southern style food for 13 years until 1980, when the founders moved locations and switched to serving exclusively Greek food, after his father retired.

The transition to Greek cuisine proved to be just what downtown Greensboro needed at the time. It also gave Jimmy and his mother a favorable reputation among visitors to the Triad because it offered something unique to the area.

"Greensboro was a ghost town at the time," Jimmy said. "We didn't have Elm Street and Greek cuisine wasn't as big then. We figured if we switched over to Greek, we could have people come into the city and the Triad."

A family affair

On any day of the week, Contogiannis is at Acropolis from 9:30 a.m. until 10 or 10:30 p.m. During these times, the restaurant serves lunch and dinner, with different menus. There are two chefs during the week and two or three on the weekends, including Jimmy.

But he isn't the only family member who works at the restaurant. His mother, sister and children often help out, he said. Eleni Contogiannis still serves as co-owner and often comes during the lunch hour and will sometimes greet customers during private parties, which guests love, according to Contogiannis.

"She's paid her dues over the years," he said. "She's a very hardworking lady."

Jimmy's sister, Liz, is the floor manager and she can be seen throughout the week. Jimmy's

children have also showed interest in the restaurant. From young Katerina, 5, to Eleni, 21, Jimmy's children have helped out whenever they can.

"My son Dino, 16, comes in and helps out and my daughter Zoey, 18, helps us on the weekends," Jimmy said. "My other daughter Eleni, 21, helps us during Christmas break and my youngest daughter, Katerina, 5, she thinks she's helping out. She keeps saying, 'I want to work in the restaurant.'"

Working with family members is pleasant because you have already established good relationships with them and that makes the restaurant what it is, said Jimmy. But there can be strained relationships too, and that's part of the work.

"You work with somebody all the time, so there's always a strained relationship," Jimmy said. "The restaurant business is one of the hardest industries to be in and there's always going to be some strain here and there. It comes with the territory."

44 years and counting

With just less than 50 years of existence under its belt, Acropolis has created a name for the Contogiannis family and Greek cuisine in downtown Greensboro. The restaurant attracts many professionals and regular customers from the area, which has contributed to the ambience of the place.

"We've got a Euro-Greek atmosphere in here," Jimmy said. "We've got Greek music playing throughout the restaurant and customers really like that."

But it's not always fun for Jimmy and his team.

"You have to put in long hours yourself, which means you don't have to hire anyone else," Jimmy said. "Years ago, I made more money than I do now, but you have to ride the tide. If the restaurant's open, I'm here."

The restaurant's menu is a combination of traditional Greek home-style dishes, including souvlaki, a dish made with meat that can be served in sandwich or dinner style, moussaka, a traditional eggplant dish, and pastitsio, baked pasta.

"The baked chicken is one of our popular dishes," Jimmy said. "We've been running it as



Owners Jimmy Contogiannis and his mother Eleni Contogiannis are fond of the murals along the walls of their Greek restaurant, Acropolis, located on North Eugene Street in downtown Greensboro. The mural depicts the Acropolis.

a Wednesday lunch special for 31 years and now we also serve it on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights. It's marinated the night a day or two before and the chicken absorbs the marinade and it's baked with potatoes."

Jimmy and one of his daughters are semi-vegetarians. While he eats poultry and seafood, his daughter doesn't eat fish. Jimmy said working at the restaurant where meat is popular among guests isn't a problem.

The family philosophy at Acropolis is to not to put anything out that they wouldn't eat themselves, according to Jimmy.

"If it's not right, it's not going out," he said. "That could be the reason for the longevity of the restaurant."

Since 1980, Acropolis has been named the "Best Greek

Restaurant" in the Triad by GoTriad, an art and entertainment supplement of News & Record, almost every year except for 2011, when Mythos Grill took the award.

Looking forward

The economy seems to be recovering, which means bigger plans for the future of downtown Greensboro and Acropolis. Jimmy said he would like to see the downtown area be further developed, thus attracting more visitors to the city and customers to the restaurant.

"Right now, I'd like to see something done with developing this side of downtown, maybe something done across the street with a mini-mall," he said.

Acropolis' exterior will receive a facelift within the next year,

which is something Jimmy said is necessary. He said he believes the outside has turned potential customers away.

"It doesn't have much of curb appeal but the inside is great," he said. "In 2012, people will be attracted to the place. I've had a fear that people think it was a diner but we're working on the outside."

As the restaurant celebrates another year of business, so does Jimmy. While he's spent most of his child and adulthood in the restaurant, he said he won't be leaving anytime soon.

"I'm too young to retire," Jimmy said. "I'm thinking of opening a fast-food Greek restaurant of healthier choices that other Greek restaurants don't have. I would have already done it if the economy hadn't gone down three years ago."

Former CNN writer converges fast-paced media world, teaching style

Julia Murphy
Reporter

Quickly eating her lunch during the few free moments she has during the day, continuously checking her email, consumed by school while keeping a positive attitude and peppy personality,



LAURA WILLIAMS

Laura Williams, instructor of education, is more like her students than she may realize.

Former students' artwork cover her walls, desk and shelving cabinet, which reminds her of what she's done and the lives she's touched.

Williams, who graduated from University of Texas, Austin, with a Bachelors of Arts degree in French and earned a Master's degree in Journalism, first worked at CNN, later finding her stride as a school librarian. She finds peace and enjoyment from what she does every day. She is the director of the Curriculum Resource Center (CRC), the Curriculum Resource Center (CRC), a mentor to education majors, a part-time instructor and the woman with the

biggest smile in the room.

Walk past the buildings Powell and Duke, beneath the ivy-covered walkway and enter one of many brick buildings with white windows on campus, Mooney. This is home to education majors and the CRC is the living room of the building, a place for students to congregate, study and find teaching resources.

The brightness of the room, the cheery staff and the overwhelming amount of teaching supplies invites more than just Mooney regulars to the CRC, which resembles a school library.

Williams started her job at Elon four years ago. The room that the CRC now occupies was renovated before her arrival, giving her the opportunity to make it more attractive. Before, it was dark, gloomy and usually locked.

Williams' favorite part of the area is the painted mural, Idea Zone, which brightens the space and gives it a youthful atmosphere. Now, there are colorful posters on the walls, lots of workspace, a cozy seating area and someone working at the desk during the weekdays and weekends.

The CRC acts as a functioning school library for future teachers, featuring books for children and teachers, games and textbooks. Williams worked as a

middle school librarian for 13 years after leaving a media position at CNN in Atlanta.

She worked for CNN as a writer, producing cut-ins. The fast-paced media world engulfed her from the beginning with the big newsrooms and her 24/7 schedule. Her interest in libraries and education resurfaced after leaving Atlanta and moving to North Carolina with her husband. She earned a library degree at UNC-Greensboro and got her first job as a school librarian at Turrentine Middle School in Burlington.

"It's good for people to reinvent themselves," Williams said. "Try new things, discover something else that you're good at."

Although it may not seem obvious, there is a connection between education and media that Williams' co-worker, Joan Barnatt, associate professor of Education, recognizes.

"You could think of teaching in some ways as a media presentation every time you get up in front of the classroom," Barnatt said.

To Williams, media and education fields are related because of the influence of the digital world. Her students learn how to create a Wiki, maintain a blog, create TV news reports and use SMART Boards and digital

cameras.

"Teachers need to know the content and the tools," Williams said. "The world we live in is not departmentalized."

Williams' students say they can see her previous media experience in her daily actions.

"I think her working style also parallels what I imagine as the fast-paced, multitasking media environment," said senior Kara Schillings.

Schillings is a CRC assistant and an elementary education major who views Williams as a friend and mentor.

"Selling a message and making an impact so that people have that information anchored in their mind to take forward and use as their own — she's very good at doing that," Barnatt said.

Williams' quirky and positive attitude spreads from person to person. She is an open and welcoming individual who is a staple in a busy student's day.

"Just spend a day in the CRC to get the Laura Williams experience," Schillings said.

Her fun education methods and the respect she gives students help them grow into future educators.

"My life at Elon would not be the same without her," Schillings said.