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The crime is not having an extra scoop

The police chief and his wife find opening an ice cream store brings the whole family together

BY BARBARA POLICHETTI

EAST GREENWICH -- Townspeople are used to seeing Police Chief David Desjarlais driving along Main street in his official black Ford Explorer and at Town Council meetings and community events.

But a lot of folks were taken by surprise this summer when they made a visit to a new gourmet ice cream shop and realized that the affable man dishing up their hefty-size cone of cheesecake-flavored ice cream was the chief.

"A lot of people do a double-take," acknowledged Desjarlais, who wears the same black bib apron and visor that the employees do at his Cold Stone Creamery, at the corner of Division Street and Route 2.

"They look at me, hesitate, and say aren't you...?"

It's a slice -- or a scoop -- of small-town America, something you'd expect to see on the old Andy Griffith Show.

But Desjarlais and his wife, Nancy, aren't quaint -- they're entrepreneurs who hope they made a wise business investment by opening the third Cold Stone Creamery franchise in Rhode Island.

The Arizona-based chain is known for the creamy, sticky texture of its rich ice cream and for its decadent mixtures with multiple toppings.

For example, sweet-cream-flavored ice cream doesn't sound overly indulgent -- until you take it up a notch, adding cinnamon, crumbled graham-cracker pie crust, chunky apple pie filling and topping it off with gooey caramel syrup to create apple pie a la mode in a cone.

Nancy Desjarlais said she and her husband, who live in North Kingstown with their two children, started looking for a business venture about a year ago. With her husband busy as chief of police, it was agreed that she would be the lead person in whatever venture they chose, she said.

"We both love to read so we thought of a book store," she recalled. "Then we thought of a coffee shop, but there were already a few of those in town."

She was scouring the Internet for ideas, she said, when she noticed that one of her nieces had been raving about a new ice cream shop -- Cold Stone Creamery -- that opened in Newport last year.

"I thought, this has to be pretty awesome ice cream if she's driving over two bridges to get it," Nancy Desjarlais said with a laugh.

On a cold day in the spring of 2004, Nancy and David, along with their son, Kyle, and daughter, Sabrina, trekked to Newport to see what all the fuss was about.

Nancy, who has business experience working for a local insurance company and running her own home daycare center, said that she was in the Bellevue Avenue shop for only a few minutes before she had a strong feeling that they had just found their new family business.

"I loved the ice cream" -- she chose the coffee and the chief opted for peanut butter -- "I saw the line of customers, and I picked up information there on opening our own franchise," she said.

Aside from filling out the paperwork, the couple spent months searching for the right location. They settled on the plaza across Division Street from the Showcase Cinema.

The Desjarlaises, who are both 39, said that they waited until last Thanksgiving announce their plans to David's parents and other family members and the reception was, well, kind of cold.

"I can remember that it was freezing out and after I announced that we'd be opening an ice cream franchise there was a lot of silence," David Desjarlais said. Since then, he said, his parents -- Roland and Jeannette Desjarlais, of North Kingstown -- have become enthusiastic aficionados of Cold Stone ice cream and unofficial employees at the shop.

Desjarlais, an East Greenwich police officer for more than 18 years and chief since 2002, said he also ran into some skepticism from his peers.

A soft-spoken man, Desjarlais acknowledged that running an ice cream parlor is not a typical after-hours business venture for a police chief.

"Some just laughed or smiled," he said, in describing the initial reaction he got from other high-ranking officers when they heard that the chief of police in East Greenwich could also be found behind the counter of an ice cream shop.

"But they only laugh until they drive by here and see the lines out the door."

He said he keeps careful track of his time and there is no overlap between his duties as police chief and his time -- mostly week nights and weekends -- at the creamery.

"I'm very careful about when I'm on duty and off duty," Desjarlais said. "I do not want room for people to say that they're not getting a full-time police chief."

At the ice cream shop, Desjarlais said, he makes it clear to everyone that he's "just Dave" and that he does the same tasks as everyone else. He fills cones and cups -- using the big, stainless steel paddles that "pull" the ice cream from the bins because it is too creamy to scoop.

He also stands at the granite stone which is behind the counter and chilled to an ice cream-friendly 16 degrees so he can mix in everything from Gummy Bears to peanut butter cups after patrons pick from dozens of toppings and let their imaginations go wild.

And, yes, like the employees, Desjarlais follows prescribed Cold Stone Creamery practice: he sings whenever someone working at the shop gets a tip.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I don't have a good voice, so I tell people they can ask for a joke instead if they want."

Asked if the business venture is a prelude to retirement from the police force, Desjarlais said, "Not at this time. It's great to have other opportunities for the future, but I've got at least a three-year commitment to the department."

There are still goals he wants to accomplish, the chief said, the primary one being to see his department in a new headquarters.

Owning a Cold Stone Creamery is fun and an investment in the future, Desjarlais, said but there is an additional bonus that he and Nancy didn't expect. Their teenagers, Kyle and Sabrina, both work there, they said, so they ended up with a true family project and quality time with their children and their children's friends.

"It's been great for us as family," Desjarlais said, "and the community has welcomed us with open arms."