

A community's lunchroom

BY JENNY CALLISON | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

WYOMING - When Half Day Cafe was named "Wyoming Business of the Year" this month, customers congratulated owners Dale and Patty Hipsley on winning the Wyoming "trifecta."

Last fall, the eatery at the southeast corner of Wyoming Avenue and Springfield Pike won the Wyoming Beautification Award. In January, the Hipsleys were among the city's Citizen of the Year honorees for the impact their restaurant has had on Wyoming's business district.

That's a lot of recognition for a business that is just over 2 years old.

The Business of the Year award was especially important for the Hipsleys.

"The nominations came from multiple sources in the community, and validated our convictions of the things that were needed here," Dale said.

Real estate agent and Wyoming resident Tom Tobias described the Half Day's niche this way: "The community needed a 'lunchroom' and the Hipsleys have provided us one. It's clean, the food is delicious. I think we all get an 'old friend' greeting from Dale and family on our second visit. He treats everyone like a regular."

City Manager Bob Harrison compares Half Day Cafe to the "Cheers" bar of TV fame: "It's a place where everybody knows your name. It quickly became a gathering place, and the traffic they have attracted has had a positive effect on surrounding businesses."

While Dale Hipsley works the front of the restaurant, Patty Hipsley is the chef - creating dishes, developing seasonal menus and managing the kitchen.

"To me, the awards are very humbling," she said. "It puts pressure on us, too. Maintaining the quality that got us the awards is the No. 1 job for us."

The challenges are very real and the economy isn't helping.

In April, the Hipsleys rolled out their new spring menu, which contained Half Day's first across-the-board price increase, a response to sharp upticks in food costs.

"We've had some price raises in the past, but this is the first time we've raised the price of our coffee, for example," Dale said. "But now, wheat costs more than sugar. Milk is up; eggs are up; cheese is up."

The cost of labor has risen as well in the Half Day's short history.

"By law, restaurants whose staff gets tips must pay half the minimum wage," Dale explained. "When we opened, that was \$2.01 per hour. Now it's \$3.50 per hour. When you multiply that times 10 staff members, it's significant."



Owners Dale and Patty Hipsley were among Wyoming's Citizens of the Year. The Half Day serves breakfast and lunch six days a week.

The café's business hours, 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday-Saturday, are designed to allow the couple quality time with their children, Nathaniel, 11, and Ella, 9. They know that profits would increase if they opened on Sundays and served dinner during the week.

"Lunch and dinner seven days a week is definitely more lucrative than breakfast and lunch six days a week," Dale said. "But we hope people catch the spirit we're operating on. If we served dinner, the kids would be ready for bed by the time we got home in the evening. And we like the idea that Sunday is a family day, a day of worship, a day of rest."

So the couple has come up with an alternate plan, one they hope will serve the community, increase revenues, and still meet their needs for a balanced life. They plan to do more catering, already on the rise, and to launch an early evening carry-out dinner service in late August, as families gear up for the busy school and work year.

"It's a compromise," Dale said. "We're hoping that early evening revenue will offset what we're missing from not being open on Sundays."

Patty added: "The menu will be different from our daytime menu, so we hope that we can reach people who are not current customers and provide something new to people who come here for breakfast or lunch."

Tobias is convinced that the plan will add to Half Day's appeal.

"Where would a presidential candidate visit if they were in the area? Half Day!" he said.



Customer Ed Hand talks with owner Patty Hipsley in the Half Day Cafe in Wyoming. The cafe was recognized as Wyoming's Business of the Year, and it has had a positive impact on Wyoming's business district.

Photos by Cara Owsley/The Enquirer

The third challenge was one that the Hipsleys' business plan completely underestimated.

"We guessed right on so much in our projections," Patty said. "Energy costs were our biggest surprise. We underestimated utilities by half, because we use so much more gas and electricity than most houses do."

Despite the challenges, however, the Half Day's revenues continue to grow, although the owners declined to give specific figures.

As Dale plots each year's sales, the peaks get higher and the valleys are shallower. But some new market-penetration strategies are on the way.

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