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FOOD

Husband-and-wife behind Gatsby's Pizza back in Bonita after health battle



Ashley Collins

Naples

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Greg Chapin, 65, didn't think Gatsby's Pizza would live on after his battle with brain cancer in 2010 and a life-threatening stroke six years later.

Yet there he was, one Friday evening in March, humming along to Dean Martin's "That's Amore" before answering the phone and putting in a take-out order. The rich smell of thin-crust cheese pizza permeated throughout the intimate restaurant setup with a booth and a few chairs and tables.

"Everything in here has a story," Chapin said.

More on Gatsby's Pizza: 3 new restaurants and a French pastry shop open in Fort Myers, Naples

Ohio State gear decorates the Midwestern-style pizzeria, the fifth, which is tucked in a small strip mall, 4836 Bonita Beach Road SW, a short car ride from Barefoot Beach Preserve in Bonita Springs.

Old movie posters from an Ohio theater hang on the walls. In the evening, there's a steady flow of customers, and Bite Squad drivers, picking up take-out orders or dining in. Chapin greets everyone with a smile.

Don't be fooled by the restaurant's name on the sign above it. It still says Sammy Shack, a former sub shop, but it's all Gatsby's Pizza, the name visible on the shop's large windows.

Greg's wife, Jackie Chapin, 58, said it was kismet when the two rode their bikes one day in Bonita last year and came across this space.

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"If we were able to open another restaurant, I said it'd be something like this place," Jackie Chapin said. They did just that and opened Gatsby's there last year in November.

She smiled as she listened to her husband talk about the history of Gatsby's, which Greg Chapin started in Gahanna, a small town near Columbus, Ohio, in 1977. It wasn't a pizza shop at first. It was a sandwich shop with beer and wine. He added his family's secret pizza recipe to the menu as the restaurant grew and expanded. He ran Gatsby's in Ohio for 20-plus years.

After selling Gatsby's in Ohio, the Chapins retired to Naples in 2000 and decided to open the first one in Southwest Florida in 2003 in Wiggins Pass Crossing.

Since Ohio, the two have opened, shut down, sold and moved the pizzeria several times. This will be their fifth try and they hope the new shop lasts for many years to come.

The reason Gatsby's came and went for so many years was because of Greg Chapin's ailing health.

It all began in 2010. Chapin wasn't feeling good. Paramedics rushed him to NCH North Naples Hospital, where an MRI revealed a tumor the size of a tennis ball. Strokes, hemorrhages and surgeries followed, keeping Chapin in the hospital for several months. He didn't know who his wife was when he woke up and had to relearn activities as simple as brushing his teeth.

With medical bills mounting and Greg Chapin recovering, the couple closed Gatsby's Pizza on Wiggins Pass.

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In August 2011, the Chapins opened Gatsby's at the Island House in Bonita, but the partnership lasted only weeks. Hospital bills had to be paid.

"We lost our home and our business," Jackie Chapin said. "But I still had him."

The Chapins were resilient through it all. Once Greg Chapin recovered, he and his wife got back into business, launching Gatsby's in Bonita Oaks Square in 2013.

Greg Chapin added: "She had to take care of me."

He lost most of his vision and hearing. He now wears a hearing aid. After the second health bout, his family thought he'd lose his independence forever and be stuck in a wheelchair. But Chapin's positive mindset and faith got him through rehab stronger than ever and today he's able to walk and move on his own.

"Believe in Him and believe in yourself and he'll believe in you and anything is possible," he said.

Though he loves Gatsby's, he realized after his health scares what the three most important things in life were — family, friends and faith. He has two daughters and four grandchildren. All his family lives nearby.

Looking around his restaurant, he smiled. Gatsby's managed to survive just like him.

Pizza runs in Chapins' blood

It was the year 1963 when Greg Chapin's uncle opened a family-owned pizza shop in Ohio. Chapin, who was just 12 at the time, basically grew up in the kitchen, working there after school and on weekends.

"That's when we came up with the dough and sauce recipe," said Chapin, who uses the same ingredients today. Of course he didn't reveal the secret behind his pizza.

As a young adult, he grew away from the family business — never completely however — and became an electrician. But pizza kept calling him back.

He opened up his own shop, just like his uncle did, only this time in Gahanna, Ohio.

"It was just in my blood," Chapin said.

He called it Gatsby's Saloon. The space was so small they served only sandwiches, beer and wine. Over time, the restaurant expanded and he added pizza to the menu. The saloon became Gatsby's Pizza, inspired by F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel "The Great Gatsby."

Jackie Chapin started working for her husband at age 19. She had a boyfriend at the time, and he a wife.

"I started in the kitchen. then I became head bartender, then manager and then his

fell in love. They dated for 20-plus years and were engaged for 13. They tied the knot in Naples in 2008.

Pay a visit to the new locale and you'll find a simple menu with pizza as the main course, with all the meat and veggie toppings you can think of. As well as calzones, gatszons and buckeye bites, half-a-pound of breaded baked morsels of chicken nuggets. The Chapins said they're hoping to serve homemade lasagna and soups and offer breakfast in the near future.

Greg Chapin said he feels blessed. He grows stronger every day, even riding his bike to work, a 10-12 minute ride from their house.

"He's the most positive man I've ever met," Jackie Chapin said, smiling at him.

He put his pointer finger in the air and said, "I have my big brother up there and my momma" looking out for me.

JLB review: At Jimmy P's Charred North in Bonita Springs, excellent steaks matter most

Gatsby's Pizza

Where: 4836 Bonita Beach Road SW, Bonita Springs.

Hours: 3- 8 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Menu: 14-inch pizza (\$12.75); calzones (\$6.95); and buckeye bites (\$5.95), half-a-pound of breaded baked morsels of tended chicken nuggets.

More: Call 239-785-0122 or visit facebook.com/gatsbypizza