



The Kelleher Family, Cup Half Full

By Adrienne Fleming

Photography by Marnie Doherty Photography

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On any given morning inside the mint green walls of Cups & Cakes, there is a steady flow of locals eagerly seeking that first cup of coffee. The buzz of the juicer, the sweet scent of fresh scones, and the familiar conversation between patrons and staff create a warm and inviting environment that shop owner Denise Kelleher cherishes. A road of ups and downs has led Denise to a place she never would have predicted a decade ago, and the walls of Cups & Cakes are covered with photographs of the special people in her life who have helped her navigate this new path.

In 2009, Denise's life changed overnight when her husband of 19 years, Bob Kelleher, passed away unexpectedly when their son Patrick was only 10 years old. At the time, Denise had a high-powered job in the fashion industry that required a daily commute to Manhattan, but after Bob's passing Denise left her job in buying and merchandising to take a position as a teacher's aide at Forrestdale so she could be closer to her son. When Patrick was born, Bob had been given the opportunity to work from home, which led to a very close relationship between father and son and allowed Bob to become very involved in the local community. He volunteered in his free time for the Rumson First Aid squad,

of which he was Captain, and coached Patrick in Rumson Recreational sports and Pop Warner Football. Denise still recalls the day she and Bob accidentally happened upon the Oceanic Bridge and saw Rumson for the first time. They immediately knew it was home.

While working at Forrestdale, Denise began selling home-made baked goods out of her home. When the idea of starting a small business presented itself, she thought at first that she could juggle both her teacher's aide position as well as a fledgling business. She quickly realized that entrepreneurship is all-consuming, and she jumped head first into her new venture. She opened Cups & Cakes in a small space sublet to her by Bain's, at the time located in the current French Market location. The kitchen had no hot water and was very small, which turned out to be an amazing learning experience. From the start, everything was made in house from scratch from the highest quality ingredients. With three people working for her in the kitchen, the biggest challenge was perfecting quantities and determining how much to make and order to keep up with the flow of customers. Denise credits her business background and her managerial, marketing and merchandizing skills from the fashion industry for helping her navigate this new world. Denise has never been



professionally trained in baking – everything she knows was taught to her by her mother. In fact, recipes passed down from her mother and grandmother are what she bases her creations on to this day.

Cups & Cakes had been thriving for three years when Denise set her sights on expanding to the former Rumson Market location. After proposing her plans for expansion to the town, she moved her business to the new space and grew the menu to include breakfast sandwiches, quiche, frittatas, soups and salads, in addition to their already popular menu of scones, muffins, custom cakes, cookies and pies. With the help of friend Mike Villane of Lead Dog Builders, she was able to reconfigure the space and complete a beautiful renovation tailored to the needs of a bakery. The new location opened at the end of December 2013, and at the suggestion of her sister, Linda Roma, included a full-service juice and smoothie bar. Sister-in-law Jane McLoughlin helped create and launch the juice bar menu.

In addition to her sisters, Denise is surrounded by many loving and supportive women who have helped make her dreams a reality. One of those women is Mary Kenny, a dear friend who visited Denise to pay her condolences shortly after Bob's passing. "She came with many comforting words and a big basket of her famous scones along with the recipe written in her own hand writing. This scone recipe has become the foundation of Cups & Cakes and is still our number one item," shares Denise. Mary's

recipe provides the base for experiments with new flavors both sweet and savory, the most popular of which is cranberry orange. Denise still has the basket that Mary used to deliver those original life-changing scones.



Completing Denise's circle of support are her dedicated employees, who have become family over the years. The late Regina "Cookie" Gilligan had worked for many years at The Rumson Market and loved to joke that she "came with the building." In her 70s when she began working at Cups & Cakes, she enjoyed the early morning hours and arrived to open the doors at 5:30am every day. "There is not a day that goes by that customers and employees don't mention Cookie. She left us way too soon and we miss her every day," says Denise. Jodi Woolley has been with Cups & Cakes since its inception and remains Denise's dear friend, confidante and right-hand person. Patty McCarron is the full-time baker and cake decorator on site. Baker and soup preparer, Jennifer Swyer, is responsible for introducing the popular Cupcake Bouquets, arrangements of mini cupcakes made to look like floral arrangements. Nancy Munley, expert in fondant creations for cakes, cupcakes and cookies, now opens the store at 6am for the early birds. Lori Oakes, artist and graphic designer, created the company logo and designs labels, packaging, menus and advertising campaigns. This year is the first that Denise, and her beloved 8-year-old Goldendoodle named Lulu, have spent as empty nesters. Patrick

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graduated from RFH in 2017 and now attends Sacred Heart University in Connecticut. He played both football and baseball at RFH and was chosen by his football coaches to receive the Vince Lombardi award for his dedication and hard work on the field. As the starting center for the football team, he helped RFH win four state championships in a row. "I so enjoyed watching those Friday night games at Borden Stadium. My sister was at every single game with me to watch Patrick and to support the RFH Bulldogs," recalls Denise. Cups & Cakes is an avid supporter of all RFH sporting and performing arts events. In January, they participated in RFH's Staff Wellness Day. Jodi and Denise presented healthy breakfast ideas to 40 staff members, including how to prepare frittatas, juices, smoothies and granola. Cups & Cakes is also very involved with supporting the Oceanic Free Library. For the last five years, Denise and Jodi have judged the Irish Soda Bread contest and The Cupcake Wars which benefit the library.

On June 10th, Denise and her community will have the opportunity to give back while honoring Bob's memory at the 9th annual Bob Kelleher Kids Triathlon at Victory Park. Patrick, an aspiring Sports Broadcaster, will be the announcer at this year's event. Denise's loved ones, including in-laws Carol and Bob Kelleher Senior, as well as sister-in-law Karen Hellman, have been key in making The Kids Triathlon a success year after year. Bob, always passionate about exercising and leading a healthy lifestyle, completed 11 consecutive New York City Marathons as well as The Iron Man Triathlon in Lake Placid three times. "When Bob wasn't working or volunteering, you would frequently see him running around Rumson, especially on the Oceanic Bridge," says Denise. Doug Rice of Split Second Racing, a Rumson resident, is the race director. He was a good friend of Bob's and collaborated with Denise to create the race in 2010. "This community event is a wonderful way to come together to honor Bob and keep his spirit alive. The race raises money for two organizations, Stephy's Place in Red Bank and The Rumson First Aid

Squad," says Denise. Stephy's Place, a local support center for grief, was founded by Rumson resident and 9/11 widow Shiela Martello. Denise volunteers at Stephy's Place as a co-facilitator for the loss of spouse group. She understands better than most how important it is to rely on others during a time of loss.

The photographs adorning the walls of Cups & Cakes pay homage to the people who have brought Denise to where she is today. This includes her biggest inspiration, her parents, the late Rose and Nick Roma, who instilled in her good values, a strong work ethic and unconditional love. It includes also her sister, who moved in with Denise and Patrick for five years after Bob's death and now lives in Asbury Park. Jim Mellaci is an important person who entered Denise's life more recently, and she believes that Bob sent him to her. Eight years after Bob's passing, Denise was introduced to Jim by mutual friends, and they have been dating now for almost a year. "I was astonished to learn that Jim's grandfather actually built the building where Cups & Cakes resides," shares Denise. "His grandfather, Preston Hower, built and ran Hower's Market, which pre-dates Brainey's and The Rumson Market." All roads lead to Rumson for Denise, who feels blessed to be able to call Rumson not only the home where she lives, but the home where she works as well.

To sign up for the Bob Kelleher Kids Triathlon, visit splitsecondracing.com.



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