



Resurrecting History Was an Unexpected Family Affair

Brothers celebrate more than a year of operating Parkette Drive-In

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As a landmark nearing its 60th anniversary, the Parkette Drive-In is in different shape than it was a few years after its 55th, when Jeff Kaplan drove past it on New Circle Road and was struck by an idea.

"One day I was driving by, and on the marquee it

says 'For Sale or Lease,'" said Jeff Kaplan, whose brother Randy had stepped in to operate the catering side of Jeff's six Subway franchises, after 20 years with the Lexington Division of Police. The two had worked together so well, they decided to open their own restaurant selling Chicago style hotdogs in a 1950s setting.

"I thought not only could we take advantage of the Parkette name and their items, but we could introduce our Chicago hotdog, which we really wanted to do," Jeff said

recalling his trip past the then recently shuttered Parkette in 2008. "So I call Randy and say, 'What do you think about the Parkette?' and he says, 'I don't.'"

What got off to a rocky start, which included the two brothers spending an entire week together in the Parkette men's restroom just to renovate it, took Jeff and Randy from seeing the Parkette name and location as not much more than a good boost for their business model, to falling in love with its history.

“As a cop in this town, driving past here 5,000 times, you’re thinking, ‘What a shame another piece of history is going to die.’ And we could incorporate all of that and save it,” Randy said. “As I really got into the deconstruction of it, from the beginning is when [I started hearing] the stories and history, and I got to go back to the beginning and see the genius that Joe (Smiley, Parkette’s original owner) really was.”

When the carhop first opened in the fall of 1951, New Circle Road was still dirt. Smiley, who had owned two restaurants in West Virginia where he first sold Parkette’s signature Poor Boy double-decker burger to feed low-paid coal miners, decided to locate along the planned ring road.

“We’re told that New Circle Road was supposed to be all highway, like the South side of Lexington is,” Randy said. “But putting a restaurant right in the middle kind of changed that, and they let him open anyway. Then you see this entire section of the city was industrially developed because of Joe Smiley.”

The brothers uncovered history and heard endless stories of Smiley and the Parkette during their eight-month renovation of the building that has led to a stronger focus on the drive-in’s dining room, in addition to the standard car service.

“We would be in here working and customers would knock on the door and say, ‘We had our first date right there (pointing at an old booth or parking spot). We’ve been married for 50 years,’” Randy said.

“There’s history here,” he said. “It’s great to be a partial owner. Not only is Jeff my co-owner and my partner, but the city owns this place... I can’t change the menu, the city owns this menu.”

Jeff agreed, and hesitates to say the Parkette is his place. “All we are, are the current caretakers, because the Parkette is bigger than we’ll ever be,” he said.

While many in central Kentucky are familiar with Parkette’s name, another name from its past is known worldwide, according to Randy.

“Kentucky Fried Chicken, the name, was used (here) before KFC had it,” Randy said. “KFC sued Joe and settled out of court for him to stop using the name Kentucky Fried Chicken. They actually paid Joe to stop using that name and he accepted. I have that document.”

The Parkette’s iconic marquee advertises boxes of chicken, but in the manager’s office adjacent to the Parkette’s renovated and state-of-the-art kitchen sits another example of the competitive relationship that Randy said existed between Joe Smiley and Col. Harlan Sanders: a bucket for Parkette’s “Kentucky Fried Chicken.”

While the kitchen may be stocked with new equipment, the way Parkette’s food is made isn’t new. “Maintaining the integrity of Joe’s recipes was huge for me. Jeff and I fought for a year over lard. We have a designated fryer just for lard that we cook our fried chicken in... because that’s what you do with Southern fried chicken, you cook it in lard. Joe’s recipe and the recipe we use now is the same. It is the same spices, the same batter mix, it’s still fresh chicken we get daily,” Randy said.

Lexington seems to be appreciating the Kaplan brother’s attention to detail in bringing the Parkette back to life. The dining room, which for the first time features table service, is buzzing at all hours of operation and the Wurlitzer jukebox plays music of 1950s Americana, while cars pull in and out of the service area constantly.

The restaurant will be featured on an episode of “Diners, Drive-In’s and Dives” on the Food Network this fall. Show host Guy Fieri stopped by in the spring to film a segment and left a spray-painted stenciling on the wall to become another part of the history of the 59-year-old institution. ©



Brothers Randy Kaplan (left) and Jeff Kaplan in front of the iconic Parkette Drive In sign on New Circle Road.

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