



Captain Sundae's ship is sailing south, opening new spot

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RITE OF SPRING: Karen and Tom Van Dam, owners of Captain Sundae, have opened the season in Holland Township and Zeeland, and will have a third locale at Washington Avenue and 40th Street in the former Dairy Queen.

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It must be spring. Children are riding their bikes on the sidewalks. Teenagers are playing tennis at Moran Park. My wife is willing to take long walks and bike rides with me around town again. And Captain Sundae is opening at three locations: along Ottawa Beach Road north of Holland, at the Main Avenue and Washington Avenue "Y" in Zeeland, and soon at 40th Street and Washington Avenue in Holland.

Yes, we will soon have three Captain Sundaes in the Holland-Zeeland area. Is it because Eric Koster of Dunes View Construction makes the Captain's replica wooden pirate ships? Is it because Tommy Turtle is nationally famous, first appeared on the "Today" show in July 2004 and then with President Bush the following September? Is it because Captain Sundae serves Hudsonville Ice Cream?

You might say that the popularity of Captain Sundae is due to the Van Dams' Disney touch. Remember Walt Disney? He was the person who dreamed of making "a family park where parents and children could have fun together." That was before 1953 when Disneyland in California was still an orange and walnut grove. Walt also said that one could "design and create, and build the most wonderful place in the world. But it takes people to make the dream a

reality."

Tom and Karen have the Disney touch. Although you could say that the success of their business is due to replica wooden boats, moments of national fame, and premium products, you should say that the success of their business is due to the people and the experience.

The Van Dams don't just sell ice cream and other related products, they sell the opportunity to eat that ice cream in a fun environment.

"We have it easy," says Tom. "When people come to Captain Sundae, they're already happy." But it isn't that easy. Like Disney, what the Van Dams do is build on that happiness. The Van Dams do it by providing an atmosphere to enjoy the ice cream with others.

"We don't provide people a picnic table on a slab of concrete," explains Tom, "We attempt to provide them a garden atmosphere with trees and flowers and winding paths and benches. We attempt to create a happy place for families." It is interesting that management scholars are just beginning to study the antecedents and effects of smiling and laughter, and the way people mirror the emotions and behaviors of others. This undiscovered scientific truth is common sense at Captain Sundae. The evidence is a relatively low turnover rate among employees and many repeat customers.

But the Van Dams weren't the first to have the Disney touch. The original captain, you might say, was Lee Mannes. Karen worked for Lee Mannes for six years during her time in high school and college. When Mannes decided it was time to sell, he asked Karen if she was interested. It turns out he had found the right buyer.

Tom and Karen were looking for a small business opportunity. Prior to owning Captain Sundae, they had both worked at Herman Miller. In fact, they first met each other at a copy machine in the special products division. After their wedding Tom worked at Herman Miller for six more years. Then he decided to test his desire to be a small business owner by joining his father at Van Dam Auto Sales in Zeeland. He enjoyed being part of a small business in a small community. Then Mannes offered Tom and Karen the business on Ottawa Beach Road.

The Van Dams thought it would be a great fit. Karen was already familiar with the business. Tom and Karen thought it would be easier to raise a family together if they could both work at the same place. But there are unique sacrifices.

Because ice cream sales are positively related to the temperature outside, the busy season is in the summer. Therefore, while many families in West Michigan are enjoying the warm weather, the Van Dams are working 60-70 hours a week. When many families are making vacation plans during November, December, January, and February while their kids are in school, the Van Dams are doing maintenance work and spending their vacation time

at trade shows.

Yet the benefits of owning one of Holland's most fun places must be worth the cost. There are now three Captain Sundaes. I'm glad. I'm already asking my wife to walk or ride bikes to them all.

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