



Visit from president highlight of the summer

By BETH WALTON Staff writer

Part of a series of stories on people who made news locally in 2004

Tommy Turtle went nationwide in 2004.

The chocolate, caramel and pecan concoction brought the popular Douglas Avenue ice cream shop, Captain Sundae, and owner Karen Van Dam, national attention -- not once, but twice.

First, the treat was featured on NBC's "Today" show in July, then President Bush tried the delicacy himself, when he made a brief stop at Captain Sundae before a campaign appearance at the Ottawa County Fairgrounds in September.

"It was such an incredible honor and it will probably never happen again," Van Dam said of Bush's visit.

Van Dam had opened early on the day the president came into town, hoping to snare some extra business from all the traffic headed to the fairgrounds.

Early that morning, she had a customer who would return later that afternoon and announce he was with the U.S. Secret Service. The agent told Van Dam that Bush would be stopping by in 15 minutes.

"It's not every day the president stops by," Van Dam said. "I sort of panicked. I was by myself and we were really busy. I just kept thinking, 'Oh my gosh, this can't be happening.'"

Employee Nicole Prince, 19, of Holland, was on her way to help Van Dam at the shop, but called to say she would be late because she was stuck in traffic.

"When I called, Karen was like, 'Nicole get over here. The president of the United States is coming,'" said Prince, who said meeting the president was both exciting and nerve-racking.

Within five minutes white vans had lined up across the street, customers were being searched, and dogs were sniffing the area.

"It was just as cool to watch them as it was to meet the president," Van Dam said.

Although Captain Sundae has always been a favorite among Holland locals,

when the "Today" show featured the shop, Captain Sundae really found itself in the spotlight.

The shop was featured last summer when the show ran a travel segment about West Michigan. Dee Dee Thomas, the show's producer, contacted Van Dam, saying she wanted to include Captain Sundae in the feature.

"It was fun and I think the segment was well done," Van Dam said. "They showed a wide variety of West Michigan, and it's a great way to get people in this area, hopefully, for years to come."

Van Dam believes customer service and maintaining the shop's family environment is the key to its success.

"We keep it neat and clean and we spend a lot of time getting the best quality products we can buy," she said.

Karen Van Dam and her husband Tom purchased Captain Sundae in 1999 from the store's founder, Lee Mannes.

"I worked for him as a kid," said Van Dam. "I was the youngest employee he ever had and I fell in love with the place."

Over the years Van Dam stayed in contact with Mannes and when it came time to sell he knew the Van Dam family was interested.

"Be careful what you wish for, it just might happen," said Van Dam, adding that owning Captain Sundae has changed her life.

"It really represents a dream come true," she said. "From way back then I knew and loved this place, and then to finally own your own business, it is the American dream."

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