



Team building has been an important component of Little's approach to managing Fry'n Pan Restaurant. She's proud of her current staff, which includes (left to right) Sarah Muhmel, Danette Little, Whitney Stolz, Veronica Zweber and Kristina Lloyd.

Family has long been a key word at the Fry'n Pan. Along with Little's siblings, members of the Bonnie Steffen family from Wakonda worked simultaneously at the restaurant. Owner Dave Stuekel employed some of his children and Little's son Travis and granddaughter Nyssa both currently work at the restaurant.

"Kristina Lloyd's grandmother, Betty and mother Connie Wipf also worked here at the same time," Little says. "Some current employees are relatives of mine and some are related to each other. I think that's one of the things that makes things work smoothly here is a sense of family."

Little's commitment to working in the trenches with her staff is also one of the restaurant's strong points. She makes it clear to new hires that working in a restaurant isn't always as "easy" as it may appear.

"There are always some down sides to any business," Little says. "We've had to deal with a tornado in 1976, a flood in the 80s, a stabbing in the parking lot and other unexpected events. The fire that shut us down for two weeks was probably one of our most challenging times. We've also gone through several remodels. When I started working here there were 18 table tops. Over the years we've expanded three times and now we have 54 table tops and can seat up to 208 people at one time."

There's one core characteristic Little prizes in herself and looks carefully for in new applicants: friendliness.

"New employees have a lot to learn when they start, but we can't teach them to be friendly," Little says. "We want our waitresses to

smile and be supportive of one another. The support of my family helped me survive the years when I was a single mom and working every day. That's an important part of working here."

Little's well of passion is fed by the owners of the Fry'n Pan chain, who go out of their way to establish and maintain a positive relationship with all employees.

"The man who owned the restaurants sold all of them a number of years ago, but he still holds an annual picnic for managers and their families," Little says. "Every year he feeds between 110 and 115 people, provides hotel rooms at a lake where we all stay and play games, eat and enjoy interacting with other employees. So that family atmosphere comes from the top. For me, there's something rewarding about working with family members every day, something very enjoyable."

After three years of employment at the restaurant (1978) Little was named Assistant Manager. In 1988 she took on the responsibility of being manager. She's the only female manager in the company and garnered Manager of the Year in 1995 and 2006.

"There are six other restaurants and each is managed by a man," Little says. "Every year we receive awards for productivity and profit, surpassing projections and those kinds of things. It's been great to be recognized for the achievements of our team."

"Over all the years, I have never gotten up in the morning and said I hate my job," Little says. "Some days, after I get home and sit down, I can tell I'm tired and my feet hurt. But while I'm here, I never notice that. The same love of my work that led me here in the beginning is still with me. I and my staff take pride in being the best and doing a great job. If someone has a bad experience here I take that very personally and want to do whatever I can to fix it. We see this as our Cheers or Arnold's (Happy Days) and we hope our customers see that too. They don't just come here for food. They're here for a great experience and our 'family' is here to serve it to them."

❖ By Loretta Sorensen

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