



COMMENTARY

How sweet it is to vend ice cream

5/22/2006

By MARY KUNZ GOLDMAN

You could say Bill Pavone is living the American dream. He works as an electrician. He has the wife and two kids, a boy and a girl. He has the house in the Town of Tonawanda, land of pink petunias and green ballparks.

But now, at 48, Pavone is getting the slice of the American pie he has always craved - the most fattening slice of all.

He is becoming Chilly Billy, the ice cream man.

Pavone has wanted to drive an ice cream truck ever since he was a kid and worked at the Buffalo Zoo's concession stand. His desire only grew when, one traumatic day in South Buffalo, an ice cream truck manager pronounced him not a good fit.

"He said I was too big," Pavone says, still wounded.

Last winter, he finally got around to his dream deferred. He found a truck on eBay for a few grand. After gathering advice on Internet ice cream message boards, he outfitted it and stocked it with novelties.

On Memorial Day, he's hitting the road.

"Of course, I'm going to be nervous," says Pavone, who is well over 6 feet, with shy eyes. "But then I'll get my feet wet, and I won't be nervous, and the smiles will start coming."

In a twist, Pavone is offering customers a bonus. Buy one of the more expensive selections, and you'll get a sample CD of local music.

It could be a few tracks by longtime buddy Tom Mayers, who is assisting Pavone in the music end of the venture and even wrote the truck's jingle.

Or a customer could opt for selections from the aptly titled "A Family Sweet," a jazz disc by saxophonist Sam Falzone, a good friend of Mayers.

The music is a cute, collaborative idea and could boost local bands. And the original jingle is a big improvement on the monotonous few bars of "The Entertainer" that most ice cream trucks opt for these days.

Still, Pavone hardly has to worry about business. He's sure to succeed, and not just because he won't be eating his profits. (He can dish it out but he can't take it. He's lactose intolerant.)

Chilly Billy doesn't have to worry about the competition. He knows that if the Super Bowl were the Sugar Bowl, Buffalo would win every year. Think of sponge candy. Or Crystal Beach suckers, still inspiring loyalty decades after the park closed.

Pavone was especially inspired by the plans of Dunkin' Donuts, which include a big bakery on Broadway in Cheektowaga and 40 additional local stores. The chain knows a thing or two about our food fixation. Its Buffalo branches are compelled to carry peanut sticks, an old local favorite that goes back to long-gone Freddie's Doughnuts.

The beauty of our sugar biz is that doughnuts, ice cream and candy don't have to compete. Sugar cravings, once satisfied, beget more sugar cravings. Like Zubaz pants, our market allows for endless expansion.

There's no better town for Pavone's indie ice cream truck.

He relaxes one day with Mayers in a backyard recording studio in the Town of Tonawanda. It's guy territory, with Jack Daniels posters and a big jar of beer can tabs.

Pavone is planning what Chilly is going to wear. Mayers, fiddling around on the keyboard, joshes him: "How about a hat with a chocolate/vanilla twist sticking out of it, like a rhino?"

Later, depositing a beer tab in the jar, Pavone grows serious.

"I would love to make the business grow, even get a bricks-and-mortar store," he reflects. "But I don't want to undercut anyone. I don't want to start a war. I don't want to cause trouble."

Hey, Bill, this is Buffalo. There's always room for one more.

You can chill.

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