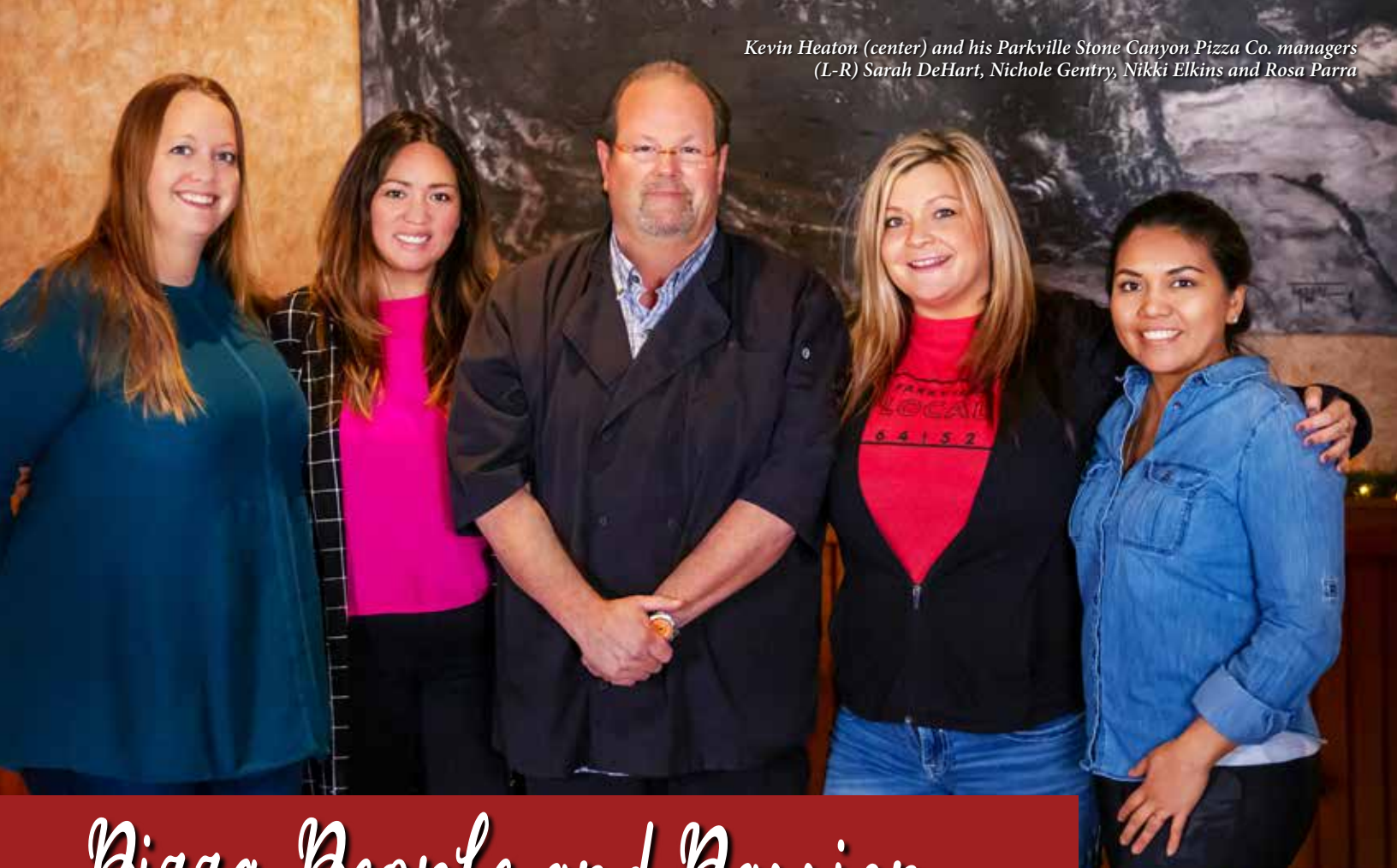


Kevin Heaton (center) and his Parkville Stone Canyon Pizza Co. managers (L-R) Sarah DeHart, Nichole Gentry, Nikki Elkins and Rosa Parra



Pizza, People and Passion: A Parkville Institution Celebrates 25 Years of Success

BY NIKKI SWARTZ
PHOTOS BY NATALIE CARVER

Twenty-five years ago, Kevin Heaton opened a restaurant at 15 Main Street in the heart of Downtown Parkville, Missouri. The Stone Canyon Pizza Company has since become a Parkville institution that customers keep coming back to for much more than just the delicious specialty pizza. Stone Canyon prides itself on serving high-quality food in a warm family atmosphere with the friendliest service, but the ingredients that really make up its success include passion, a dedicated staff, a strong sense of community both inside and outside its front doors and, of course, Heaton himself.

A Passion for Pizza

Kevin Heaton had a passion for pizza from a young age. At 14 years old, he went to work at the very first Godfather's Pizza in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. Later, he bought a few Minsky's Pizzas in Ames, Iowa. He then sold those to his lifelong friend and business partner, Joe Gallagher, and moved to Kansas City. There, Heaton purchased Fuzzy's in Westport from Ken "Fuzzy" Kremer and Ron Schoonover. From 1990 to 2000, he and Schoonover operated The Phoenix piano bar and grill in Downtown KC together.

It was during this time, right before the Flood of '93, that a friend put a bug in Heaton's ear about Parkville. Heaton was living in

Overland Park, Kansas, at the time.

"I looked at the town and thought, what a cool little town. Then the flood came and everyone was gone," he recalled. "I owned The Phoenix at the time and I told my partner Ron Schoonover, we oughta open up a quality-driven pizza place, because everything was price-driven at that point in time."

Two years later, Heaton opened The Stone Canyon Pizza Company in Downtown Parkville. He finally moved to the area 15 years after that, because he "got tired of driving all the way from 119th Street." He said settling into Stone Canyon was a "good change of pace," after The Phoenix and Fuzzy's, and he quickly fell in love with downtown, English Landing Park and the entire community.

"People in Parkville are genuinely nice people — and so are people north of the river as a whole — I'll say that," he said. "The best move I ever made in my life was moving here."

Heaton co-owns a second Stone Canyon location with Gallagher at 504 NE 70th Street in Gladstone, Missouri. It relocated from Zona Rosa in July 2019. Gallagher co-owns and manages the Gladstone Stone Canyon location. The two friends have known each other since 1982 — longer than Gallagher has known his wife, he said. He said he and Heaton have disagreements, but they share the same work ethic.

"We probably take 10 days off a year between the two of us,"

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Friends and business partners Kevin Heaton (L) and Joe Gallagher

Gallagher said. “He does things well that I don’t and vice versa. Kevin is the big-picture guy, and I’m all about the details. We’re good touchstones for each other.”

A Parkville Institution

Heaton’s philosophy behind Stone Canyon is rather simple: Deliver good food and good service in a warm family atmosphere.

First, the food. Stone Canyon has been making its food from scratch and sourcing high-quality, local ingredients since the day it opened. Stone Canyon’s selections are all made to order from the freshest ingredients. In addition to what many consider are the best gourmet pizzas in the city, the menu also offers a delicious selection of handcrafted appetizers, salads, pastas, sandwiches, gluten-free options and full bar with a wide selection of locally crafted beers.

There are a dozen specialty pizzas, including the Grand Canyon, South of the Border and the Spicy BBQ Chicken, which is Heaton’s favorite. If you read the menu closely, you’ll find a nod to his former businesses and colleagues — a sandwich called “The Phoenix” and a pizza called “Fuzzy’s Favorite,” named after Kremer, who was a former KC Chiefs’ defensive tackle.

Stone Canyon also attracts customers with scrumptious specials, including tenderloins on Tuesdays, the Detroit Pizza special on Wednesdays and the “Best Burger in Town” on Thursday nights.

According to Gallagher, the quality of the food keeps people coming back. “We’re clean and well-staffed but, ultimately, it’s the perceived value,” he said. “It’s the quality of what we sell and how we prepare it.”

As for the service, Heaton rates his team of 33 employees as “excellent.” Staff retention is important to him, and he has a core group of about 18 people who have worked at Stone Canyon for five-to-10 years. Heaton said he has employed more than 500 people in the 25 years Stone Canyon has been in business, and they’ve all contributed to the restaurant’s success.

Heaton and his staff strive to provide a warm family atmosphere for Stone Canyon customers. They focus on making customers feel good each time they visit.

“We want to make you feel good and stir some emotion when you come in,” he said. “When we get you in the door and you’re comfortable, you’re going to like the food.”

They must be doing something right — Stone Canyon consistently ranks among *Pizza Today’s* list of the “Hot-100” independent pizzerias in the country.

“Our reach goes way beyond Parkville,” Heaton said. “We could never do the volume we do with just Parkville. Strength of brand

A large advertisement for Blue Heating and Cooling. On the left, there is a logo consisting of a hexagon with a stylized 'B' inside, and the text 'BLUE HEATING AND COOLING' in large, bold, blue letters. Below the logo is the phone number '816-719-1099'. At the bottom left, there are two boxes: one for 'Service call Only \$79 call today' and another for 'FREE Humidifier with purchase of furnace'. On the right side of the advertisement, there is a collage of images: a family looking at a laptop, a Blue Heating and Cooling service van, a dog, and a smiling woman. The text 'FROM OUR FAMILY TO YOURS' is overlaid on the collage. The website 'BlueHeatingAndCooling.com' is visible in the top right corner of the collage. The entire advertisement is set against a light blue background with white arrows pointing right.



Joe Gallagher (second from left) and members of his Gladstone Stone Canyon Pizza Co. family

and how we're operated is what keeps the place in business. The basic foundation of a good, strong business is here."

For customers, it's simple. Stone Canyon hits the mark with great food, great service and a comfortable environment. Over time, these ingredients have created a solid foundation of regular customers.

"You can come in, relax, enjoy good food and it makes you feel good," said Manager Nikki Elkins. "Our food speaks for itself — everything is made from scratch."

The Heart of Stone Canyon

At the heart of Stone Canyon is Heaton, who cares about staff members as if they were his own family and who welcomes customers like they are old friends. On any given day of the week, you'll find him in his Stone Canyon office next to the restaurant. He hasn't missed a day since March, when COVID-19 concerns began.

"I never got out of my routine. I needed it this year for sure for my mental health," Heaton said. "My staff was uncertain about their financial future and I did everything in my power to make them whole. They've hung in there, kept their chins up and worked their butts off for the customer. It's impressive."

The Stone Canyon staff meets each day and makes decisions as a group. Everyone has a role and a voice.

"This restaurant is dependent as much on me as it is on the kitchen guys, the managers, the servers and the front counter people," Heaton explained. "We're a family and we treat each other like that. We function as a family, we look out for each other and that's why we're successful."

Heaton has cultivated a strong sense of family among his staff through his own example.

"My No. 1 priority is this business and the families I support through it," Heaton said.

He explained that because his wife, Debbie, worked in the restaurant business, too, she understands his dedication.

Rosa Parra, one of the Parkville managers, said Stone Canyon is not a restaurant, it's a family, because that's how Kevin runs it.

"Kevin cares about what's going on with everyone, he wants to make sure everyone is ok," she said. "Everyone cares for each other, we're a family and we support each other."

Parra said she's worked many other places, and although she's only been at Stone Canyon for one year, nothing compares to the family she's found there. "I'm grateful to be here," she said.

Elkins has stayed at Stone Canyon for 10 years because "it's more a family than a job," she said. "I enjoy the camaraderie."

Heaton has won many awards, but he decidedly rebuffs the individual recognition because, in his view, so many people have contributed to his success. Howard Schultz, the former Starbucks

chairman and CEO, noticed something different about Heaton when they met in Stone Canyon's upstairs party room last year.

"I have a different perspective," he said. "Howard Schultz said to me, 'Your perspective is great from 50,000 feet up, as well as on the ground.' I look at things differently than a lot of people."

In fact, Heaton looks at things differently than most business owners. He is more about building others up instead of basking in his own accomplishments. For example, he's proud that, in some cases, Stone Canyon gives people a family who otherwise might not have one.

"One of my biggest rewards is watching my people leave here better people than what they were when they came in the door," he said. "I'm about trying to lift people up. I try to look at how can I, how can Stone Canyon, make your life better? It's not about serving you a pizza. It's about how you treat people."

His perspective on success is different, too, and he doesn't think he's attained it yet. "Honestly, I don't think I'm successful. I've been blessed. I want to be a good husband and role model, I'll define success when I'm done," he said. "Failure is not an option for me anymore. That's why I work seven days a week, I'm relentless in what I do. If I make people better, they will make me better. But I don't want to take my foot off the gas."

Heaton loves his community just as much as his business, and he's passionate about giving back. But true to form, he doesn't like to talk about his community involvement or highlight all the good work he does for Parkville and Kansas City as a whole, including volunteering with various local charities.

Gallagher said this is typical of Heaton. "His involvement with the community is huge," Gallagher said. "I'd hesitate to put a tally on how much he's donated to his community."

One effort Heaton will crow about, however, is his part in relocating Bill Grigsby to Downtown Parkville. The statue's new home is right across the street and diagonal from Stone Canyon. Heaton helped fundraise, organize and worked with The National to get the statue moved. Len Dawson and the Chiefs' Ambassadors attended the dedication and spoke about Bill's importance to the Chiefs and the community.

"It was a community effort to get him relocated. It was a good thing," Heaton said. "I knew Bill's wife and children, so it was a project I enjoyed working on."

Heaton said he feels lucky to be a part of the Parkville community. "I've been blessed by being part of this community," he said. "I've come across many really good-hearted people and I'm so lucky. They make me better."

The Next 25 Years

To celebrate Stone Canyon’s 25-year anniversary this year, Heaton had planned to throw a party for the community in English Landing Park, complete with food, drink and a band. However, COVID-19 has cancelled those plans.

“We still plan on that in the spring, if we can, but 2020 is almost the year that wasn’t,” he said. “Kids are missing out on a lot of things, and I feel bad for people who’ve missed so much. But I’m not going to let COVID bring down the morale of my customers.”

His long-term goal is to keep Stone Canyon relevant for the next 25 years. Don’t look for Heaton to make big changes or modernize any time soon, but count on him to maintain the values and partnerships that have made Stone Canyon a favorite family dining spot.

In his humble opinion, the City of Parkville has done a great job with Downtown Parkville, and their success boosts Stone Canyon’s. “Everyone from Kelly Putnam, Main Street Parkville executive director, on down to the city crew that maintains everything does a great job,” Heaton said. “It takes all of us — merchants, the city, the Main Street association — together we succeed.”

Heaton said there are so many people who make Stone Canyon what it is — especially his staff. “I’ve been surrounded by extraordinary people, and I’ve learned so much. I’ve learned about business from my mentors, and I try to mentor my people who work for me,” he said. “The biggest gratification I get is watching former staff grow from employees to moms and dads who then bring their kids in to eat.”

While Heaton won’t take direct responsibility for the past 25 years, Gallagher said the secret to Stone Canyon’s success is no secret: “It’s Kevin,” he said. “He is relentless. He works at this diligently and really studies the business.”

To sustain anything successfully for 25 years, you have to make some sacrifices. And Heaton has. So one day, when he finally decides to retire to his River Hills Estates home, he said he plans to give back to his wife for all of her sacrifices in the name of the restaurant business. He said they plan to travel more. Even in retirement, however, Heaton said he might continue his side gig as a consultant for the restaurant industry.

Until then, Heaton remains 100% committed to Stone Canyon. “I’m going to finish my career in Parkville,” he said.

Heaton said he’s grateful for his “tremendous staff in Parkville and Gladstone and thankful for all the customers who’ve supported Stone Canyon over the past 25 years, and especially this year.”

Stone Canyon has been good to Parkville, and Parkville has been good to Stone Canyon over the years. Heaton said he isn’t worried about any challenges — including COVID-related ones — that may lie ahead.

“We’re very resilient. Support from this community to Stone Canyon during this rough time has been absolutely tremendous,” he said. “All the years of being in this community and giving, this community has given back so much to me and the staff. It’s been overwhelming and I’ll forever be thankful. To our customers, thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for making us who we are.”



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