

The Zilli Family Story

Mrs. Zilli was born and raised in Milwaukee on the East side off Brady Street. She came from a tight-knit family with two sisters and a brother. She says she had a wonderful childhood, with parents who had good values.

But times were very hard for her family. Her father tried homesteading in Montana, and her father had a business there that didn't make it. So they came back to Wisconsin and a family friend took her family in and helped them get started, helping her dad get a job in the Third Ward in a warehouse.

When Mrs. Zilli was 15 her father became ill, so she left school and went to work in an office.

She met Angelo Zilli, the man who became her husband, first at a resort in northern Wisconsin, then again in Milwaukee. They married not long after.

Angelo Zilli was born in the Bronx, NY, and his family moved to Norway, Michigan (in northern Michigan) when he was a boy. His family had a small farm in Norway. Angelo joined the Marines when he was 18 and when he was done with his service, he came to Milwaukee. Mrs. Zilli recalls that many young men from his town was moving to Milwaukee because that's where the work was.

Mr. and Mrs. Zilli moved to Waukesha and Angelo ran a Sentry store in Waukesha.

Mrs. Zilli was a stay-at-home mom with four boys ages 7 – 17 in 1968 when their good friends Ralph and Charlotte Peyton (a well known Jewish family in the community who had a meat market in Waukesha) suggested to Angelo that he invest in a restaurant. So Angelo invested everything the Zilli's had into a Tasti-Freeze, which is today Zilli's Grandview Inn.

At the time, Mrs. Zilli was not happy but she says, "It was done. So, I pitched in, after all I had a family to support and we had to eat. Over time, I grew to enjoy it." The boys went to school and then they would come into the restaurant after school.

Mrs. Zilli recalls that running a restaurant was very hard work. She says, "we endured many hardships such as road construction – they closed off Grandview and then Summit Avenue in the 1970s. But we just kept working and trying to pay the bills. Everybody chipped in, even my youngest helped out, who was just seven."

Mrs. Zilli recalls that Ralph Peyton taught Robert Zilli - who does all their purchasing today - everything he knows today about the meat business. "He'd show him how to cut the different cuts of meat. He knew his meat! We had a lot of respect for him. So that legacy has stayed with our company."

The Zilli family remodeled the Tasti-Freeze into the Grandview Inn. Mrs. Zilli recalls that Ralph Peyton was so proud when they opened. Times were good. But then, Mr. Zilli got sick in 1977, at just 46, and passed away a short time later.

Mrs. Zilli recalls that at her husband's wake, son Jim asked what she thought of trying catering. "I said I didn't want to do it, but we did it anyway. It was hard work and I did it for about six years and Jim kept getting more clients, more events, and eventually we started to hire more people and it grew."

So today... in the words of Mrs. Zilli

Zilli Hospitality Group is our company, and it has grown to nearly 300 people. We operate Coast Restaurant, Ellen's on Grandview in Waukesha, and cater hundreds of beautiful events – personal and for companies - each year all across town. I love what we do, I'm very proud of my family.

I've enjoyed seeing it grow, but it's not all ice cream & cake. We have had our disagreements, so it's taught us all to be very disciplined & open minded to get along. We don't hurt one another. What we do is good for the business

When you have as many employees as we do, there's always something going on. But somehow it all works out. Deal with it! I don't think people deal with things like we did.

But it's been hard work getting there. I've learned to overcome adversity over the years.

People sometimes ask me what the secrets to success are. Here is what I tell them:

- *Work hard*
- *Believe in what you're doing*
- *Believe in your family - it's very important. Spend time together.*
- *Whatever you try, keep at it! Don't give up. You'll get a big sense of accomplishment by doing so.*
- *Give something you don't think you'll like a try - I didn't think I'd like the restaurant business - but I did.*

Mrs. Zilli has always said to her family, “be the best of who you are every day and don’t compromise.”

The Zilli family takes special pride in giving back to the local community by supporting area food banks, charities, education and many local groups through donations in kind, ticket purchases and donations of food. For example:

- ZHG donates three meals each week to a local church which is then distributed to local soup kitchens to provide dinner for their clients.
- They also donate extra surplus packaged food to the food pantry and each year, ZHG has donated turkeys during the holiday to the food pantry as well.
- ZHG routinely donates auction items for use during fundraising events.
- The Zillis often speak at job fairs for students.
- They also encourage staff to make time for community service.

“I feel good about our partnership with the Langers,” said Mrs. Zilli. “I’m very excited about this new venture together, and I know they’ll work just as hard as we will to put our best foot forward at all times.”