

THE LOWRY AVIATOR

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meet the
D'Onofrio Family

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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meet the *D'Onofrio Family*

Calling All Chocolate Lovers For Valentine's Day



By Lowry Resident **Suzi Fogarty**

If you are looking to brighten your day- and who isn't in frigid February- run to Stargazer Fine Chocolates & Coffee for Valentine's Day. Guaranteed your mood will brighten after entering this family-owned shop located to the rear of Snooze on Colorado Boulevard. You will be warmly greeted by one of the five D'Onofrio family members: John and Norene, parents of Karen, the master chocolatier; Tim, Karen's brother and the assistant chocolatier; and, Jason Meyers, Chief Operating Officer and John and Norene's son-in-law. This candy shop is a family affair.

John, an attorney, is a man of many hats who seems quite comfortable being Stargazer's spokesperson, marketer, delivery guy (as needed) and extremely proud father and grandfather. John was instrumental in Stargazer's metamorphosis. "After Karen earned her master's degree in Theology, I asked what she planned to do for work," he said. She was

unsure, but he observed what made her happy was, "...baking or cooking with chocolate at home."

Ultimately, Karen applied and was accepted to Ecole Chocolat in Vancouver, British Columbia where she obtained her Master Chocolatier designation. Returning to Denver, she interned and later was offered the use of Christ the King Catholic Church's Commissary. On December 12, 2017, the family opened the doors of Stargazer. When asked why the shop is named Stargazer, Karen said "The team named it for the Stargazer Lily because it sounded dreamy and romantic, like chocolate." "Dad says it was my idea, but it was really his, though I was happy to go along with it," she added.

"For me the shop is all about community, family, smiling kids, the joy of making people happy and having a European chocolate shop in the heart of Denver," John said. "For Karen it's all about the science and her artistry."

Norene, a retired elementary school librarian, welcomes all and gives tours. She says she has no set responsibilities. "I keep the front of the shop restocked and organized, as well as doing whatever needs to be done that no one else wants to do like ordering, shipping, taking and filling customers' orders. I only work a few hours per week, more hours during holidays or



special events. Working here is different than being a librarian, but I enjoy helping out and being here,” she said.

Karen develops, designs and hand crafts 700-800 truffles per week (1,000 plus for holidays) in the true Belgian style. Between Christmas 2020 and January 2021, Karen had an exciting project designing her wedding cake topper with bride and groom chocolate hippos. “I don’t know why, but I love hippos!”

Her display case is stocked with 20 trays of different varieties of truffles. Her talent appears limitless. These bite-sized pieces look too beautiful to eat...but indulge! Her truffles are incredibly flavorful and melt in your mouth. For past Valentine’s Days, Karen has created special truffle flavors like strawberry champagne, raspberry cream and exotic ganaches. The shop has had all-you-can-eat buffets for the February holiday with cake, brownies and special truffles. Because of the pandemic, plans this year will change. “I’m still experimenting but have yet to decide 2021’s special flavors,” Karen said. “I’m thinking Feast Baskets filled with an array of Valentine’s Day offerings. Although the pandemic with ever-changing restrictions and less profitable months has been challenging, overall business has done well.”

Karen said her worst day at the shop happened on one of their busiest days. “When I walked out from the kitchen to find the truffle display case had just four trays with any truffles at all! That was the first time I ran to the storage room (since renamed the crying room and stocked with tissues), had my breakdown and returned to the kitchen to madly make more truffles.”





Besides truffles, Stargazer offers several varieties of chocolate bars and medallions which can be customized with corporate logos or special messages. Tim also oversees specialty dipped chocolate items like pretzels, homemade marshmallows and Rice Krispie squares. This year he will be making milk, dark and white chocolate Valentine's themed offerings, in heart-shapes and more. Whenever Karen gets behind, Tim assists. When asked what his worst day in the shop was, he replied, "I don't have bad days...just long days."

Jason, the Chief Operating Officer, joined the team last September. He spent the past three years in Guam as a Commander in the U.S. Navy and remains in the Reserves. Jason is using his organizational and technology expertise to upgrade the shop's coffee and wine bars, as well as developing efficient curbside pickup. "My military skills translate well in reducing chaos around the shop. It's less stressful being a civilian and I love working with family," he said. Jason's daughter, Katherine, 14, recently became a part-time employee and is excited to learn the chocolate business.

Stargazer is a magical place for the young and old. The D'Onofrio family is doing Denver proud!



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