

TWO MINUTES



Bob Cigliano

# Soul, and heart

## Lillian Dent goes south after successful Wall Street career

Lillian Dent retired in 2004 from a sales-executive position at Dow Jones, where she'd worked for three decades, and quickly found a new calling: running LL Dent, one of Long Island's few soul food restaurants, alongside her daughter, chef Leisa Dent. We checked in with her on mother-daughter bonding, Southern cooking and making the transition from high finance on Wall Street to high-risk entrepreneurship in Carle Place.

### Did you dream of running your own business?

This wasn't my long-lost dream, but once I got started working on the business plan, I started to get excited. This is a new career for me. There's a great amount of excitement and joy. There's a connection with our customers. We go to their weddings and funerals.

### How does running a small business compare to working for Dow Jones?

You're totally in charge of everything. If you don't make money, you have to use some of your own. You're totally responsible. It's not like you're going to a corporation that's going to take care of all the financial needs. A small business, you're it.

**After retiring from Dow Jones, why start a restaurant?** My daughter is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. She likes the creative side of the business, where she can have control, doing recipes, creating and cooking. When she got out of culinary school, she wanted a restaurant,

but we couldn't afford it. Once I retired, my goal was to get a restaurant where she would have the say in the kitchen and I would work in the front of the house.

**What's it like to work with Leisa?** It's wonderful. She manages the food – purchasing the food, the cooking, the menu – and I manage the servers, talk to our customers, find out if everything is OK and have conversations. I create friendships with a lot of our customers.

**How has working with your daughter changed your relationship?** It really hasn't. We've always been very close. She's my only daughter. We don't fight. Whatever issues come up, we talk about them and try to come up with the best way to solve the problem.

**Why aren't more African-American women starting companies?** One of the things is financing. With the economy the way it is, a lot of banks aren't lending money. It takes

money to finance a small business and you have to have additional money when things don't go right. You have to be willing to spend your own.

**Were you able to get funding?** The first bank turned me down, so I said, "Nobody believes in my project more than I do. If I have to do my own financing, I will." I went to the bank and took out a loan with a lower interest rate than the Small Business Administration was offering, using my house as collateral.

**Are there other Southern-food restaurants on Long Island?** I know of a few that opened since we opened, but there's not a lot of full-service restaurants. We have a liquor license. A lot of them are just takeout places. There is a lot of demand for Southern food – there are a lot of Southern transplants in New York. I met people who moved here from the South or went to school in the South and were looking for Southern food. Before we opened, they said they had to go to Manhattan.

**Where do the recipes come from?** They're family recipes. I grew up in Georgia. My daughter changed several to make them her own. Like the collard greens: When I grew up, it was made with pork. We make ours with smoked turkey, to make it healthier.

**How do you address the fact that fried food isn't the healthiest?** We fry with canola oil, which isn't like frying with lard or other oils that stick to the food. We also have a number of different foods that aren't fried, and we offer vegetarian foods.

**What's your top advice for someone starting a business?** Write a business plan. I learned so much just writing and putting things together. What permits I would need to establish my business, geographic information you need as far as getting people to come to the restaurant ... you need to be in a place where people have a certain income level.

**Do you plan on retiring?** I'm the type of person that will probably never totally retire. It's not who I am. I have to be active. I've seen so many people retire. They're not long for this world. That's not who I am.

**Will you open another eatery?** There's a possibility we'll open another restaurant, depending on the economy. Right now, I'm working fewer hours than I did before. I used to be here all day, six days a week, but now I'm off on Tuesdays and sometimes I don't do lunch. I'm playing more golf now. I just want to enjoy my life.

— CLAUDE SOLNIK