

# Fortune 52

## LONG ISLAND WOMEN MAKING A DIFFERENCE

*This column is dedicated to honoring 52 different Long Island women each year who make significant, unique and lasting contributions to their communities and workplaces.*

BY BEVERLY FORTUNE



**LILLIAN DENT, PROPRIETOR**  
**LEISA DENT, PROPRIETOR/  
 HEAD CHEF**  
 LL DENT RESTAURANT

Owning and operating a restaurant is as much a lifestyle as it is a business, and for the many who seek to pursue their lifelong dream of being a restaurateur, they find that it is a lot of hard work and sacrifice.

Lillian and Leisa Dent are a rare combination: a completely hands-on, mother-daughter restaurant team. Their passion for their restaurant, LL Dent in Carle Place is exhilarating, and their story is inspirational.

Lillian retired after working for many years as a sales representative for Dow Jones. Leisa always had an interest in cooking and after graduating from the Culinary Institute of America, worked in several high profile chef/management positions. Leisa was also the personal chef for her high school friend, actor/comedian Eddie Murphy. "I was coming into my own [at that time]," Leisa remembers fondly.

After Lillian's husband passed away, Leisa came back to New York to be with her mother. "I saw how hard Leisa was working," Lillian says of the long hours Leisa was putting in at her job. "I had no experience at all, but I said to her, 'Do you want to open a restaurant?'"

Lillian went to the Small Business Administration (SBA) for advice on how to open her own business. She took the classes and seminars they offered, and Lillian wrote their business plan. "Lillian says, 'We had the concept we wanted, which was Southern cuisine. When we saw this space [in Carle Place], our eyes met and we just knew [this was the right location].'"

They opened LL Dent in 2006 and have been dishing out their Southern hospitality along with home-style American cuisine with a Southern flair, ever since. Their menu is unique to LI and includes specialties made from recipes handed down from their ancestors, including Fried Green

Tomatoes, Toby's Georgia Hash, Hoppin John, a side dish made from black eye peas and rice and real Southern Fried Chicken.

"People want to go out to eat to feel good," Leisa says.

With Leisa overseeing the kitchen, and Lillian working the front of the house, their recipe for making sure the customer is satisfied works perfectly. "Customer service is so important and I want everyone to leave happy. I go around and talk to everybody," Lillian says. "Our customers are like an extension of our family." And true to her word, we had to stop our interview many times for Lillian and Leisa to acknowledge every customer who came in or left the restaurant. "Many customers ask me, 'Can I hug you?'" Lillian reveals. "That's the kind of restaurant we have. We are very hands on."

"I like working with my mother," Leisa says. "We both stay in our own lanes."

Both women credit Tom Schaudel, LI's most renowned chef and restaurant owner, for their success. "Tom is our guardian angel. He saw what we needed and just kept coming back to help us," says Lillian.

"People now come to us for advice," Lillian says.

Doing something you love can inspire you to work even harder, and even though they spend many hours at the restaurant, the Dents donate their time and services to several local nonprofits. "We get a lot of joy out of volunteering," says Leisa.

"Leisa is very open and forthcoming," Lillian says, looking at her daughter. "There's nothing else to be," Leisa responds. Lillian, who always seems to get the last word, says, "She's getting more and more like me." 🍷

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