

Pizza shop's a slice of life

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Pizza wasn't what Tony Altomare had in mind 15 years ago when he was a financial planner at Creative Financial Group in Newtown Square.

Yet, thanks to the persistence of a client, he's turned on his ovens at five stores throughout the Delaware Valley, including one in Drexel Hill, and focuses his efforts on great food, great service and giving back to the community.

"I love helping people," said Altomare, founder and owner of pizzeria Tony Roni's and Tony A's. "They're our customers and we want to give back. For me, it's a win-win. I can give back and I retain customers."

There are several ways schools and associations can partner with Tony Roni's.

The restaurant has already hosted events for Big League Haircuts, St. Dorothy's School and the Delaware County Chamber of Commerce.

Groups can also sell gift cards for the pizza and potentially make \$3 for each one they sell.

They can also host a Night at Tony's, where 10 percent of profits are directed to the organization.

Or associations can sell Tony hoagies and tomato pies as a one-day fundraising event.

There's also the school scrip program, in which parents order cards through the schools to earn a monetary benefit for them.

Altomare's charitable contributions began with the initiation to his foray into Italian pies.

A son of one of his administrative assistants, Claire Lawther, had leukemia and she had to stop working because of it. As he visited the boy in the hospital, Altomare thought, "You see all these kids in (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia) and they have no choice."

He realized his possibilities, so he directed his goals to include community involvement.

But that's just as integral as the food and the service with the mission clearly stating, "Great food with great attitude."

It's that focus that helped the chain garner the "Best of Philly" award for its tomato pies in 2008.

Altomare takes his customer service seriously.

Last week, at the Drexel Hill store, he noticed the pizzas on the counter were a little overcooked and without enough cheese. The pizza maker was fired.

"He apparently wasn't paying attention," Altomare said, adding that employees undergo extensive accounting and training. "If the pizza doesn't look fresh, (customers are) not going to come back."

In another case, a woman visited the store and ordered a sandwich, but something was not quite right. The store employee froze when confronted and she e-mailed Altomare's assistant.

The assistant apologized and sent out gift cards. Altomare himself gave a personal apology.

Three weeks later, the woman – a high-end event planner – booked him to cater a 300-person Halloween party.

All this from a location Altomare wasn't even considering.

Delaware County wasn't on Altomare's mind when he was visiting Chester and Montgomery county locations for his business, but the space at the Pilgrim Gardens Shopping Center had him hooked.

"It is very community-oriented," Altomare said. "The mix was right. I like to be in the community."

So, since March, the store with its flat screen television and fireplace has thrived.

In fact, Altomare said, "We sell more tomato pies in this store than I do in all of my stores."

He points to a customer who visits this particular store from New Jersey three times a week.

The owner said it all has to do with the food and the customer attention.

"I don't think you could have better service than us," Altomare said. "We're like family. We want people to look at us as their neighborhood pizzeria."