

Evening Echo, Thursday, October 11, 2012

● **WHEN was the business set up?**

In 1942 — this year we are celebrating 70 years in business.

● **Tell me about the history of the business:**

In 1941, my grandmother Margaret Fitzpatrick, who was originally from Kinsale but living in Dublin, was travelling on the Cork to Cobh train to visit her sister when she saw a "For Rent" sign on the window of a small house at the side of the road in Glounthaune. She was anxious to return to her native city and was experienced in running a business in Dublin. She decided to rent the premises and so, in 1942, the shop opened under the Fitzpatrick name. In 1967, her son William, my father, took over the business. He added a second front room which incorporated a small library and a public phone. Shoppers could purchase not only foodstuffs but boots, shoes, paraffin oil, candles, items of clothing and many other necessities. All the transactions were done over the high counter and the customer was heralded by the ringing of the front door bell.

● **How has the business changed over the years?**

There have been major changes since the early days, particularly from an operational point of view. There was no such thing as self-service in the old days — the customer was handed their purchase over the counter. The whole way in which products are now scanned for prices was another major change. The shop I grew up in had a limited range of products and we would have known all the prices in our heads! As for paying, I never really recall much money being handed in. 'The book' recorded where people got credit from week to week until pay day.

● **How did you get involved in the business?**

As a young child, I worked in the shop alongside my parents. I can recall many of my responsibilities — weighing up the bags of sugar, washing the glass sweet jars and polishing the apples with my warm breath and a polishing cloth! In 1971 my father, William, died at the relatively young age of 54, leaving my mother Nora to carry on the business and raise their seven young children. It was due to her determination and hard work that the business continued. In 1975, I returned from teacher-training college in Dublin and took up a position in a local school and worked part-time in the shop. The following year, I married Martin O'Neill from Little Island and together we took over the running of the business. I subsequently resigned my teaching post and, over the last 35 years, we have run the business together. The shop is now managed by our eldest daughter Kerri. She is assisted by approximately 30 staff, including my sister Noreen who



Martin and Geraldine O'Neill with their daughter Kerri outside the family shop, Fitzpatrick's, which has been serving the people of Glounthaune for more than 70 years.

Picture: Larry Cummins

MARIA ROLSTON chats to Geraldine O'Neill of Fitzpatrick's Shop, Glounthaune.

We're keeping granny's shop legacy alive

looks after the purchasing for the store. On any given day, between one and four of Kerri's siblings can be found helping out, ensuring the business continues to be a truly family affair.

● **Tell me about your customers:** Our customers are drawn from a very wide base of people who are looking to avail of all the services and facilities of a good convenience store, our quality fresh food and confectionery products.

● **Has your customer base changed**

much over the years?

Yes, a great deal. Up until 1997, the shop's main customer base was the multitude of people who made it their stopping off point for fresh food and particularly the soft whipped ice-creams, on what was then the main Cork to Waterford road. In 1998, the shop was bypassed with the opening of the East Cork Parkway, something which threatened the very existence of the business. However, with much

work, determination and re-focus, the business recovered and continued to grow. Today our customers are drawn from the immediate environs of Glounthaune and even from all over Cork city and county. Our fresh food, particularly our home bakery, continues to be a major attraction.

● **How have business trends changed over the years?**

Trends have certainly changed. The business my father ran had no fresh

food offering, except perhaps the odd Thompson's cake on a Friday. In the early 1980s, we first started making a few rolls and sandwiches for the passers-by and a bowl of coleslaw was cautiously added to the counter. Today we find ourselves focusing more and more on our convenient fresh food offering and outside catering, thereby moving away from the traditional grocery shop.

● **Has the recession affected your business?**

Similar to many other businesses, the recession has affected us but, for the most part, it has brought many positives. We have had to 'recess' and review all aspects of how we were operating. Consequently, it has offered us a great opportunity to re-focus and see what is really important in life as well as in business.

● **Have you seen any famous faces in your store over the years?**

All our customers are famous to us for the very individual and unique presence they bring with them when they visit our shop!

● **Have you ever had any strange requests?**

There have been some unusual requests from customers over the years, most of which will have to be kept under wraps. There was one instance when I recall a regular customer needing a lift home with her shopping as her own transport wouldn't move. However, on leaving the shop with her, I realised her own mode of transport to the shop was still outside... her horse!

● **What do you think has been the secret to your success and survival over the years?**

'A man who cannot smile shouldn't open shop'. I believe a smile, a word of recognition and a genuine interest in people has served our business well.

● **Do you think there's a future for your business?**

I believe there will always be a place for good convenience stores like Fitzpatrick's, who serve at the centre of their locality in so many ways, offering people a sense of community, an experience which is disappearing in Irish society today.

● **Would you like to see the business handed down within your family in generations to come?**

Statistics show that while family businesses represent 90% of all indigenous business in Ireland, merely 12% of them survive to the third generation; therefore we would indeed. Our daughter Kerri now manages the business, however, we have always made it clear that her most important job is to live her own life, whatever that might be for her.

For now this is the family business, we will have to wait and see how the story unfolds.

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