

St. Louis Catering Company Survives Nightmare That Almost Closed the Business, Reaches Its 40th Anniversary

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Finnering's Catering Service, the site of a double homicide that made national news two years ago, will mark its 40th anniversary on October 20th. Reaching the milestone is significant. The business, one of St. Louis' oldest and largest food-service companies, teetered on the brink of closure after the owner's wife and their adult daughter were killed by an employee who was upset that his wages were being garnished.

Charles Finnering, founder of the firm, escaped injury when an employee hid the 79-year-old man on his motorized scooter in a walk-in freezer.

Celebration of the 40th anniversary will be bittersweet and observed quietly among the company's 65 employees, many of whom were at the warehouse when the shootings occurred, said Susan Akscin, 55, Finnering's niece who now runs the family business.

A marketing executive, Akscin never intended on joining the catering company -- until her uncle called and asked for her help the day of the shooting rampage.

Akscin became president of the firm after 16 months of intense on-the-job training and following Finnering's death in 2007. She shares ownership of the catering company with a long-time employee, Patty Meier, who was shot five times during the melee.

"The hardest challenge after the shootings was getting employees over their shock and fear, and to refocus," said Akscin. The company temporarily shifted its food-service preparation to another caterer but continued to deliver meals to its clients, most of whom were non-profit organizations including the Head Start and Meals on Wheels programs. The company was back in full service within one week of the tragedy.

However, other challenges beset the caterer: rising food and fuel costs, and copper theft. Despite them, the catering company has adapted and grown. In September 2008, the company vetted the 2nd largest contract -- worth \$1.4 million -- in its history.

Their recipe for success? "Quality food, affordable prices -- because we "power buy" in large bulk and obtain better deals - and excellent service," said Akscin. Today Finnering's Catering prepares over 12,000 meals daily -- almost twice the amount it prepared before the shootings. "Although the economy is bad, and every day is still a challenge, we already survived one nightmare," said Akscin.

Finnering's Catering Service began in 1968 out of a grocery store operated by Charles Finnering and his father. During the 1970s and 80s, the company owned and operated wedding banquet halls in suburban St. Louis. In the early 1990s, with the surrounding neighborhood changing, Finnering's Catering moved downtown and shifted its focus to serving non-profit organizations. Although the bulk of its business continues to be non-profit organizations, it re-entered private event catering in January 2008.

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