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Don's Original on the Waterfront

Story by Mike Latona

Photos by Andrea Dixon

SUMMER

labors of love

On hot summer days, hundreds of boaters, beach-goers, park visitors and other pleasure-seekers descend upon Don's Original to satisfy their hunger.

Then there are the 12 or so folks behind the counter, trying desperately to crank out burgers, hot dogs and french fries fast enough to keep everyone happy. With limited counter space available for customers and employees, this is no easy task.

"It gets very, very hot. You have to wear shorts," said Mike Nichols, 17, a parishioner at Irondequoit's St. Margaret Mary.

The conditions were hot and hectic when Mike debuted as a Don's Original employee last summer, he recalled.

"It was a shock — it blew my mind," he said. "You're going to bump elbows with people and knock drinks over. I did that my first couple of days."

Yet Mike, who is nearing his one-year anniversary at the restaurant, says now he couldn't be happier.

"It's a really great job, I have to say," he said. "I work the counter a lot, and the custard. And I've dabbled with some cooking; I like doing that."

The challenge is appealing too. "I can take six orders (at one time). The adrenaline just kicks in," he said. "It's almost better when it's busy. It makes the time go by faster."

Don's Original has been a staple of the Rochester lakefront scene for several decades. The hamburger stand is located in Sea Breeze, the point at which Irondequoit Bay meets Lake Ontario. Its customer base is derived in part from boaters and Sea Breeze Amusement Park, as well as folks simply out for a summer drive.

There are many other dining possibilities along this stretch of Culver Road, including Sea Breeze Park itself. A top expert regarding the park's culinary offerings would be Matt Weidenbach, from Holy Cross Parish in Charlotte. Last summer — Matt's first as a Sea Breeze



Mike Nichols, 17, a parishioner at St. Margaret Mary in Irondequoit, serves frozen custard at Don's Original at Sea Breeze on April 25.

employee — Matt rotated among all the park's food stands, preparing and serving such delectables as submarine sandwiches, pizza, sugar waffles, burgers, cotton candy and popcorn.

Matt, 17, did run into some trouble with Dip-N-Dots last summer, saying he served many of the ice-cream treats before co-workers pointed out that he had mistaken the "large" size containers for the "small." Cotton candy turned out to be less adventurous, he said.

"I had always wondered how you make cotton candy. It's fun, but after a while you're just standing there twirling. It's kind of boring," Matt commented.

Matt said he likes the challenge of working when it's busy, but did acknowledge there are times he'd like to run off with the customers.

"On the hot days I wish I was on the water slides," he said.

Back at Don's Original, when business heats up, Mike has seen custard lines extend halfway around the restaurant's exterior, and crowds in the main restaurant go right out the doorway.

"We always run out of chocolate almond," he said, referring to the business's signature ice cream.

In those trying conditions, Mike said, it's important to keep a cool head: "You have to be all right with people yelling at you. Everyone gets — I don't want to say angry — frustrated if you don't wait on them

right away."

Mike said his job is still challenging even when business is slower in the winter, explaining, "Some nights it's just you and the cook." And, he added, bad weather still doesn't prevent an occasional big burst of business.

Both Mike and Matt say their jobs are made pleasurable through friendships with co-workers, as well as their rapport with the "regulars." Mike added that he's been witness to some bizarre incidents, such as the woman who once ordered two quarts of chocolate almond. She informed Mike that she was going to ship the ice cream to someone in Colorado.

"I was like, 'All right,'" remarked Mike, who said he didn't ask her how the ice cream would reach its destination without melting.

Mike teaches religious education at St. Margaret Mary and also plans to teach at Vacation Bible School this summer. He expects to work full-time at Don's Original this summer before starting his freshman year at Syracuse University.

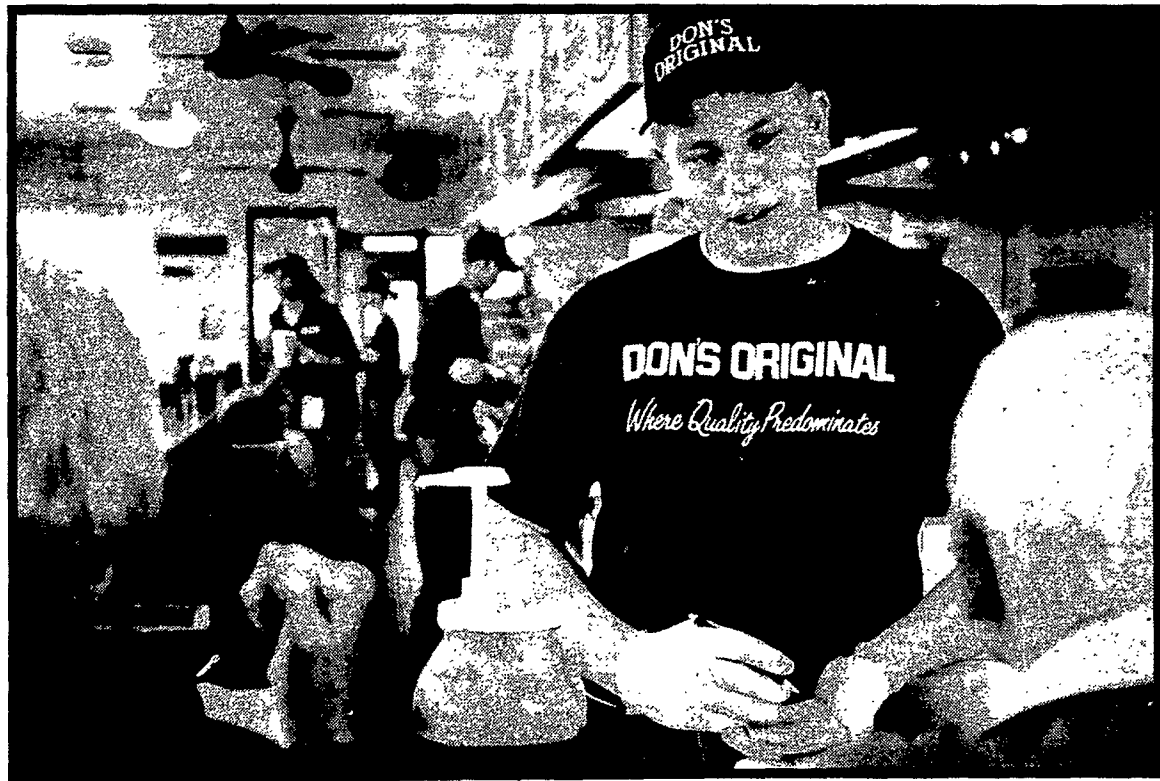
Matt, a junior at Greece Olympia High School, also foresees a heavy workload. Along with a planned return to Sea Breeze, he recently began working at another popular summer spot, Frontier Field. Matt staffs the "La Fiesta" Mexican-food stand during Rochester Red Wings baseball and Rhinos soccer games.

"I love it. It keeps me busy," said Matt, who teaches religious education at Holy Cross as well.

Working heavy hours over the summer, in Mike's opinion, "teaches you a lot of responsibility." That means sticking to your regimen, even on gorgeous days when he might be tempted to play hooky from his job.

"This is important. Your friends will be there when you get out of work," he said.

**COMING NEXT WEEK:
City teen volunteers**



Mike takes an order from customers. He works the counter and the custard stand.