



THE SCHULZ FAMILY

BY ANNE MCNULTY

Sonny “Oscar” Schulz sits in a booth in his favorite restaurant, Fisherman’s Inn, which has been a part of the Kent Narrows landscape for 85 years. He also happens to own this restaurant. At age 82, this former Eastern Shore waterman has achieved much. From culling oysters at age 11, so he could help support his widowed mother to owning Fisherman’s Inn, the seasonal Fisherman’s Crab Deck, and Fisherman’s Seafood Market, he and his late wife, Betty, have played an important role in Queen Anne’s County. Their three sons—Andy, Jody, and Tracy—are continuing to do the same.

He hands me a 364-page cookbook compiled by Betty, in which she chronicles

the growth of this beautiful area and of the family business. “That book was a heck of an undertaking for her,” Sonny says.

In 1930, Kent Narrows “was just a piece of marsh. Nothing on it but muskrat beds, two small grocery stores, and some oyster houses,” wrote Betty. Her father, known as Captain Alex Thomas, mortgaged 10 acres of this marsh and built a small two-bedroom house, which included a six-table dining room that would serve as the beginning of Fisherman’s Inn. In 1931, her parents opened a seafood packing house and their business began to grow.

Betty took over the restaurant in 1945 when her parents separated. After she and Sonny were married in 1956, they renovated the restaurant several times. “It was old and in bad shape,” Sonny says. “So we finally tore it down. We built the new Fisherman’s Inn in 1971.”

Betty wrote of her husband, “In the late ’60s Sonny wondered if we could take the

chance of building a new inn...He deserves most of the credit for our success over the years. We both put in our time and worked together, but he is the one to have foreseen what we needed.”

Nine years later, on a cold December night, the inn exploded in a fiery blaze and burned to the ground. Betty’s collection of French and English oyster plates was demolished, along with paintings, and other memorabilia. All that was left, were twisted remnants of metal and rubble.

“Jody and Tracy belonging to the Kent Island Volunteer Fire Department, were there immediately,” wrote Betty. “It was a sad night to see such destruction, with so many of our employees gathered around watching.”

By July 28, 1981, the restaurant was up and running again and in 1991, the Crab Deck and the Seafood Market were added to the business. Then tragedy struck again when the building containing both these

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businesses, caught fire in 2002, and Hurricane Isabel flooded it in 2003. “A sense of weariness sometimes overcomes you because of the time you put in,” Betty later wrote.

In spite of all these challenges, the family has prospered. “Our biggest achievement was building a business that employs 200 people in the summer and 100 in the winter,” Sonny remarks. Some of his workers have been there for more than 25 years. “We have excellent help here. We treat them like we want to be treated.”

The Schulz’s have also reached out to the community. Sonny has been a Queen Anne’s County Commissioner, a founding member of the Maryland Charter Boat Association, and a member of the Maryland Watermen’s Association. In 2004, the Restaurant Association of Maryland named him as Maryland’s Restaurateur of the Year.

He’s also served on several boards. For nine years he was a member of the Chesapeake College Foundation. “He was very involved and very generous to us,” says Lauren Halterman, Executive Director of the Foundation.

While we discuss the amount of time the family has given to various organizations, Sonny’s son, Andy, joins us in the booth. “We’ve helped so many organizations and individuals,” he says. “We’re quite a presence on the Shore,” his father adds.



His sons, Jody and Tracy, have been longtime members of the Kent Island Volunteer Fire Department. Jody is currently president and Tracy is assistant chief. Jody distinctly remembers being at Fisherman’s Inn when it burned to the ground.

They both give of their time, money, and energy and put their lives in jeopardy to do this. Why do they keep doing it? “I don’t know how to quit,” Jody says. He thinks a moment and then says, “It’s been bred into us since birth. We’ve watched my parents all these years—helping their employees and others. We also have an obligation to help.”

Local writer, Brent Lewis, author of *A History of the Kent Island Volunteer Fire Department*, has known and worked for the Schulz family for a number of years. “Jody approached me with the idea for this book,” Lewis says. “He was very supportive of my efforts. They do a lot of stuff behind the scenes.”

Janet Akers, is the Acting Director of Chesterwye, a center for developmentally disabled adults. It has nine residential homes, a day program, and supported employment. This busy lady is also an employee at Fisherman’s Inn and the Crab Deck.

She talks about the annual Christmas luncheon the Schulz’s provide for her Chesterwye group, which feeds about 100 people. “It’s great to see their eyes light up and to see how happy they are,” Sonny says of these disabled adults.

Jody comes to the Center every Christmas and plays Santa Claus. His son, dressed as an elf, came along this past Christmas to assist. “The Schulz’s help us out financially and in kind,” Akers confirms.

Jody also sits on the board of the Kent Narrows Development Foundation. Board chairman, Dick Smith, explains that the foundation’s purpose is to enable the business area that encompasses the Narrows, to continue to grow and prosper. “We all work together to make this area the jewel of Queen Anne’s County,” Smith says, “and the Schulz’s are an integral part of our county.”

There will be another addition to the Narrows when Jody completes building Hyatt Place in 2016, which will be a four-story, 84,000-square-foot hotel and conference center. “We have seven boys coming up in our family—mine and Tracy’s sons—and we’re looking to the future,” Jody says.

The past, however, is still very important to the Schulz’s. In back of the Inn, lies the garden designed by Betty and Sonny. In this tranquil spot, with a waterfall flowing into its pond, stands a granite marker. Placed here by her family, it’s engraved with Betty’s photo and a basket of roses—her favorite flowers.

At her crowded funeral on December 13th, 2011, employees both former and present came to pay their respects to “Miss Betty.” Her oyster plate collection, that she worked to replace and her cookbook give the Inn its special nostalgia. Yet, it’s the growing family she left behind and their continued philanthropy within the community that’s her most enduring legacy.