

PAY BACK, PAY FORWARD; BUSINESS OWNER IS A TIRELESS VOLUNTEER FOR COMMUNITY CAUSES; SERVING HUMANITY (AND CHICKEN)

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LAKELAND

Steve Sullivan grew up in a single-parent home -- his mom raised him along with his two sisters and two brothers.

When the Lakeland native was 8 years old, he was a Little Brother in the local Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, and it changed his life.

Now he is determined to give to the community that gave to him.

Sullivan, owner of the Lakeland Outback Steakhouse, has been there to lend a hand for several community events, such as the Margarita Ball, the Lakeland Chamber's Business After Hours, Politics in the Park and others.

And he doesn't give a second thought to volunteering on his day off.

'You go back out there and give to the community that's giving to you,' he said while working at the restaurant, dressed in an Outback T-shirt and hat.

Every year, Sullivan works at about 15 to 20 charity events, some of them eight to 12 hours long. 'People say I'm a workaholic, but I love working,' he said.

Sullivan's charity work involves preparing and serving food to the community, and he always takes volunteer Outback employees with him.

Outback encourages volunteerism among its employees and also offers pins, T-shirts, hats, pins and dinners to thank the employees for giving back to the community.

One of the most recent events Sullivan and some employees worked was the Lakeland Chamber's Business After Hours event at Cannon Buick on South Florida Avenue.

'He has helped us out every year,' said Danny Cannon, co-owner of the car dealership. 'When I call him up, he's always willing to help. He takes care of everything from the food and serving standpoint. He does a wonderful job for us.'

This month, Sullivan also provided food for a Boys and Girls Club dinner at Busch Gardens and took 15 employees with him to help.

'I love cooking and serving at community events,' he said. 'I'm a hands-on partner.'

Sullivan, 29, began his Outback career seven years ago as a busboy. It was then that he began volunteering with his co-workers.

'When I first volunteered with Outback, it was fun,' he said. 'It was fun and exciting to see how Outback brought the restaurant to the community.'

The community is an important part of Outback, he said. 'You can sit in these four walls and run a restaurant, but giving back to the community is important.'

For the Thanksgiving holiday, Sullivan donated a turkey and canned goods to a family through Catholic Social Services.

But Sullivan also has a personal reason for his volunteerism.

While growing up, he utilized any help the local community could provide.

'If it wasn't for the community, I wouldn't be here today,' he said. 'Big Brothers/Big Sisters was one of the biggest impacts in my life.'

His Big Brother, Joe Saunders, is a father-figure for Sullivan, and they still see each other on a regular basis. He calls Kathy Saunders 'Mom.'

'We feel like he's our son too,' Kathy Saunders said, adding that Sullivan lived with the couple often while growing up.

'He was always raised doing for others and working hard,' she said. 'He's a real hard worker.'

She said it's his nature to give back to others. 'He's just that type of person,' Saunders said.

One reason Sullivan enjoys volunteering so much is because he grew up here. 'It all comes from the heart,' he said.

Sullivan attended Lime Street Elementary School, then went to boarding school in Tampa, came back to attend Santa Fe Catholic High School and then Polk Community College. He began focusing full time on his work with the Outback before he could graduate.

When he began with Outback at the age of 21, Sullivan worked his way up from busboy to waiter, to bartender and then manager. He worked at other Outback restaurants and was manager in Gainesville and South Tampa. But he would still make trips to Lakeland to volunteer for the March of Dimes or the annual Margarita Ball, a United Way event that collects toys for children.

In September 1999, Sullivan paid \$25,000 for a five-year ownership contract for the Lakeland store. Under terms of the contract, he owns 10 percent, making him a managing partner. He can renew the contract every five years.

Sullivan says Outback is his family, along with his biological family, and particular folks in the area.

'When you participate in the community, you generate different families,' he said. And there are several people he feels he can call mom and dad.

Janet Tucker's children went to school with Sullivan, and she's known him since he was in ninth grade.

'He's one of my children,' she said. 'I think he's one of the finest young men, and Lakeland is very fortunate that we were able to keep him here.'

Tucker said, however, that people may take advantage of Sullivan because he's so generous.

'He's very unassuming,' she said. 'He doesn't really want people to know what he does.'

Although he already puts in more than 150 volunteer hours per year while working 60 hours a week, Sullivan still wants to give more.

'It can be tiring, but I enjoy it,' he said.

Sullivan would like to become a Big Brother himself and help other charities in the community.

'It's fun to help people,' he said. 'It's better than winning the Lotto.'