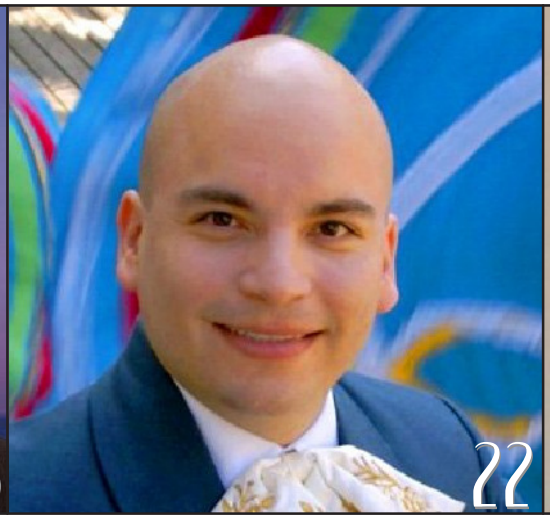
ON THE TOWN Ezine.com

May/June 2011

Lana Duke
Art In The Garden
Fiesta Noche del Rio
Texas Folklife Festival
Cactus Pear Music Festival
Javier Flores – Gabriel Ibarra
Shanon Peterson Wasielewski
Plus 12 Additional Articles



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Lana Duke Gives Back

By Ashley Festa | Photography Greg Harrison

Sipping her latte in the Prime Time Bar at the downtown Ruth's Chris location, the restaurant's owner talks with her hands as she speaks about the challenges she faced growing up in Canada's foster care system.

The hot pink jacket, long pink nails and bright pink lipstick reflect the lively spirit of Lana Duke. This is not a woman who has lost faith in such a system. Now, she just finds ways to help.

She always knew she wanted to give back to children like her as soon as she had the means to do it because she understands the need for a safe, loving environment for kids coming from abusive homes. When her mother abandoned her before her first birthday, she went into foster care in Ontario, Canada. She lived with one family until she was 12, and then transferred from family to family for years.

"As a foster child, I had some good relationships and some not so good," Duke said. At 18, she took off on her own for New Orleans with only a few hundred dollars in her pocket. To make ends meet, she sold pots and pans door to door.

"No one else was in charge of my life anymore," she said, which for her was a positive change. But with the freedom to make her own decisions also came the responsibility of supporting herself.

"When you don't have anyone to fall back on, you either step up to the plate or you don't. I chose to try to step up to the plate."

When she landed a job at a Catholic newspaper, Duke walked up and down the street knocking on doors and visiting business owners, persuading them to buy advertising. It was on one such visit in 1968 that Duke met Ruth Fertel, owner of Chris Steak House, at the time a small, 35-seat restaurant.

After establishing her own advertising agency in 1975, Duke paid a visit to Fertel to explain how the ad agency she had been using wasn't positioning the restaurant correctly. Convinced, Fertel handed over her tiny advertising budget to Duke, telling her she didn't care how the money was used, as long as she didn't overspend.

Never afraid of taking a risk, Duke "rolled the dice and spent the entire budget in three weeks." But her plan worked, and Duke eventually helped build the restaurant into one of the largest steakhouse chains in the world. Thus began the friendship that lasted until Fertel's death in 2002.

"It's an amazing, unbelievable gift from God that I came to New Orleans and ended up meeting this lady," Duke said.

Duke opened her own Ruth's Chris franchises in San Antonio, and she also owns locations in Canada. And it is through her restaurants that she is able to assist the children in crisis at Roy Maas' Youth Alternatives in the Alamo City and similar organizations in Canada.

Most notable of her efforts is a Thanksgiving feast Duke and her staff host each year.

"Thanksgiving is my most favorite holiday of the year because there aren't presents involved," she said. "All you think about is family. And I thought, wouldn't it be great to spend it with the kids."

She sets a long dinner table at the Concord Plaza restaurant location, bringing back memories of her youth with her first foster family. Duke explains the meaning of Thanksgiving to her young guests and tells them how much food was cooked for the feast that day. Employees volunteer their time to serve the children, and each child takes home a small gift to remind them of the occasion.

About 100 kids attend the dinner each year, and they're given the opportunity to share what makes them thankful. Many talk about their families and how they hope to see them again.

Duke understands the pain many of them feel as they wonder what they did wrong to lose their families. But at her restaurant on this day, there's just a lot of love filling the room.

"It's more joy for me by far than it is for them," Duke said.

But it's not just children who receive special treatment from Ruth's Chris in San Antonio. Because taxi drivers are often the first and last people that tourists encounter during a visit to San Antonio, Duke established Taxi Driver Appreciation Day to honor cab drivers. Each year the restaurant serves a gourmet sandwich lunch to about 250 drivers.

"Taxi drivers have been a big part of Ruth's Chris success, so it's our way of saying thanks," she said.

Duke and her restaurants have won several awards for community involvement. In 2006, the downtown location was named Best Restaurant With a Heart by the Downtown Alliance. Most recently, Duke received the National Association of Women Business Owners 2011 Entrepreneurial Spirit Award in the Inspirational Category, given in March.

"I'm so grateful that my life was rough when I was young, because I can face anything as an adult," Duke said.

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