



WHEN JULIANNE CAME HOME TO BELLA'S

BY TEDDY DURGIN

Julianne Sullivan's life story up until this point reads almost like one of those Hallmark/Lifetime Christmas TV-movies that permeate both networks each year from Thanksgiving on. She grew up and graduated from high school in scenic, small-town Cape St. Claire, Md.; moved away and established a thriving career in real estate, working in such major markets as Los Angeles and New York City; only to return home to Cape St. Claire to run the charming, small business that's been in her family for decades.

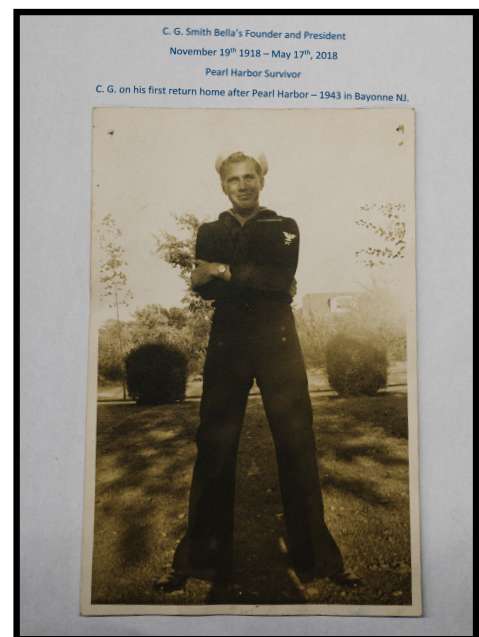
The business? Bella's Liquors, which was started by her grandmother and grandfather -- a Navy man and Pearl Harbor survivor who put himself through night school and eventually earned an accounting degree -- with financial help from Sullivan's great-grandmother. "They started it as a bar and restaurant, and they had a license to sell on and off," she recalled. "That was 1964, and my grandfather saw that the off-premise business was really picking up. So, he expanded that. Around 1974, he moved to the location we're at right now ... and we've been here ever since."

Sullivan has been at the helm as Bella's proprietor since December 2017, having left a cushy executive's post in the Big Apple. What's been the big difference? "Retail never ends!" she exclaimed, with a laugh. "I was in apartment management

specifically. When I left, I was at the very high corporate level. I had paid holidays and weekends off. But retail? Retail is all day, every day. You get your orders in, then you make a new order. And over and over again. It's never-ending. It's been a huge learning experience for me these 18 months-plus. It's been like being fresh out of college and learning a brand new job."

But it's been the Hallmark/Lifetime moments that have made the lifestyle change worth it. "I do love meeting people," she said. "We're a small community. Cape St. Claire has that old town feel. We have a 4th of July parade. We have a big strawberry festival each June. You can walk to your local grocery store or to where you get your hair done or to the Ace Hardware store. I did graduate high school from here. So, I came back to something that was familiar."

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Bella's Liquors, which was started in 1964 by Julianne Sullivan's grandmother and grandfather -- with financial help from her great-grandmother.

She also came back to a lot of relatives. "Pretty much everybody in the family has worked here!" she noted. "My mother works here now. My Aunt Christine, my sister, my nephew, and my stepdaughter all work here. Of course, I work here."

Sullivan was set to become the full owner of Bella's Liquors on July 10 (this interview was conducted nearly a week prior). "The Liquor Board has to approve me buying everybody else out," she noted. "I'll basically be buying out my mother and aunt." Moving forward, she hopes to do her grandfather -- who passed away in May 2018 at the age of 99 -- and his memory proud.

She also hopes to take a little of what she learned in real estate and apply it to packaged goods. "In apartments, customer service is key," she remarked. "If your customers aren't happy, they're not coming back. So, whether it's happy with their apartment or happy with the wine selection you're offering, it's all about the service you provide. We may not carry everything, because we're a small store. But we're happy to order whatever you

"[Julianne] hopes to continue gaining insights and assistance from the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA), of which she is a proud member. 'For the last year, I've been attending the meetings and learning all of the different laws. It's also been good to network with the owners of different businesses that are very much like your own.'"

want or refer you to another local store in the neighborhood." She especially loves pointing customers to Maryland brands. "We're a big Navy area being so close to Annapolis, so we get a lot of out-of-town people here. If they're driving, they're like, 'What can I take home that's 'Maryland?'' And we'll tell them, 'This is from Baltimore, this is from Dundalk, this is a Boordy wine.' Whatever the case may be."

Finally, she hopes to continue gaining insights and assistance from the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA), of which she is a proud member. "For the last year, I've been attending the meetings and learning all of the different laws. It's also been good to network with the owners of different businesses that are very much like your own. It's been especially interesting to learn the intricate nature of how legislation affects us, affects small businesses. For someone like me who came from the corporate world where I didn't realize how such laws can affect you, it's been a real eye-opener!" ■

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