

## Small business, big award

### My Chef Catering wins top U.S. Chamber of Commerce honor in Washington, D.C.

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By **MEG DEDOLPH** Staff Writer

WASHINGTON -- My Chef Catering of Naperville, owned by Bill and Karen Garlough, took top honors in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year Awards on Thursday night, beating six finalists from across the country.

"I've almost got tears in my eyes," Bill Garlough said, as he and Karen Garlough accepted the award. "It's such a moment. We're humbled and honored to be here and we accept this award on behalf of our employees."

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**Chef Dave Opielinski of My Chef Catering cleans up after preparing some meat for cooking. Growing out of a small deli store and moving into catering events such as Oktoberfest, My Chef Catering took top honors in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year Awards on Thursday night, beating six finalists from across the country.**

*Brian Powers / Staff photographer*

Garlough also thanked his wife.

"She's got such creativity and concern for the client, and a nice way with people," he said.

The two of them credited Naperville and the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce for their success.

"Naperville is just a wonderful place to live," he said. "The community is thriving and it's pro-business and it's got the most wonderful spirit of volunteerism. I really think that's the major reason we're up here."

The business caters from 3,000 to 4,000 events a year, sometimes up to a dozen different events a day, he said.

Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce President Mike Skarr said he was pleased to see a local business recognized by a national organization.

"I can now retire in peace," he joked. "This is as good as it gets. It's an honor for the community and what makes Naperville what it is."

The Naperville catering business, founded 18 years ago by the Garloughs, was one of seven finalists nationwide for the award, in its second year.

Minuteman Press of Naperville, owned by Ray Kinney, was among the 60 semifinalists for the award.

Last year, My Chef Catering was one of 60 semifinalists.

Other regional award winners are Faces Day Spa & Retreat of Hilton Head, S.C.; Permac Industries of Burnsville, Minn., a precision machining company; Guidant Financial Group of Bellevue, Wash.; M3 Glass Technologies of

Irving, Texas; Tredway, Lumsdaine & Doyle, a law firm in Downey, Calif.; and F.A. Peabody Company, a property and casualty insurance company in Houlton, Maine.

Eligible businesses must make less than \$10 million and have fewer than 250 employees. They are rated in areas including financial history, employee practices, customer service and community involvement.

Even filling out the application for the award turned out to be educational, Karen said.

"You live so day-to-day, you're trying to get orders out, you're booking orders," she said. "This really allowed us to sit back and think about the last 18 years, what we accomplished, where we're going, our exit strategies."

When the Garloughs left corporate careers to start My Chef, they had some ideas about what they didn't want their business to be.

"We both knew we wanted to have a more humanitarian business," Bill said.

They worked to instill a respectful workplace culture - employee disagreements are expected to be handled behind closed doors without inappropriate language, for example.

They wrote an employee manual, which Karen said defines the company's rules and regulations, so there aren't any "gray areas."

They offer paid sick days and health insurance and pay above-average wages, Bill said.

"It's important to ensure people have what they need to take care of themselves and their families," he said.

And they try to offer employees a say in the company's decisions. The business has 25 full-time employees and about 50 part-time workers, Bill said.

"Our insurance is up for renewal," Karen said. "We met with our insurance company rep and talked about a number of different plans, and there are some plans we think our employees might prefer, so we're putting it up for a vote."

They try to provide employees with opportunities for education, whether it's setting aside money to pay for seminars or encouraging people to go to trade shows.

They also encourage volunteerism and community involvement, the third phase of a three-part business plan the couple wrote when they started the company.

"Once we had our business developed into what we feel is a market leader, and we're comfortable with that, we sat down and said, 'OK, now it's time to focus on the community,'" Bill said.

They decided to work with groups, including the Rotary club, of which Bill is a member; Naperville Cares; Fox Valley Hospice; and Hesed House in Aurora.

Employees don't need to be told to box up extra food to take to the Aurora homeless shelter, Karen said.

"It's part of our culture, and employees have embraced it so it's not a Bill and Karen thing," Bill said. "It's a companywide thing."

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