

## Finding many ways to serve Gold Star franchise owner 'Chili Rick' gives back to Bellevue whenever he can

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He's done it thousands of times.

Stick fork into coney.

Place coney into bun.

Ladle chili over coney.

Sprinkle on onions and cheese.

Rick Schmidt is a coney maestro because he has owned the Gold Star Chili franchise in Bellevue for 32 years. But the man many call "Chili Rick" believes business is about serving more than five-ways, chili-cheese fries and coneys.

Schmidt also serves his community, sponsoring sports teams for the Bellevue Vets, organizing fundraisers for the Boys & Girls Clubs and offering a helping hand to police charities.

"Rick realizes the world is a better place when people give," says Bellevue Police Chief Bill Cole, who has known Schmidt for 22 years. "He lives that."

Schmidt sometimes lobbies Gold Star CEO John Sullivan to get the company involved with local and regional causes.



He draws the line at sponsoring bowling cards and high school yearbooks, because "there are just too many of them." Otherwise, if someone comes to Schmidt asking for help, he'll usually find a way.

Sure, the exposure might boost his food sales, but he supports the community because he believes it's his responsibility.

And because he loves people.

"I don't do it for the business," he says. "I've got their business. I do it out of appreciation."

There's a story about how, years ago, Schmidt went to the funeral of a longtime customer. When he heard there were no family members present, he offered to serve as pall bearer.

Sometimes, he gives older customers a ride home. He once made a tradition of giving a fruit basket to a customer every Christmas. She reciprocated by presenting him with a six pack of beer every year. After she died, the woman's daughter brought Schmidt a six-pack because, she said, that's what her mother would've wanted.

For much of his life, Cole only ate Skyline Chili. Now the police chief says he goes to Gold Star only because of Schmidt. Surely, he's not the only "Chili Rick" convert.

"To have someone like that in the community for 32 years is invaluable," says Sullivan. "He's known some customers since birth."

At his restaurant, which rates as one of the highest-selling Gold Stars, it's like Schmidt is a secret ingredient.

While deciphering orders, building coney dogs and forking spaghetti one Friday at lunch, Schmidt sees a woman waiting to pay at the register.

"New haircut, Betty?" he yells at her.

He asks a man across the room how his diet is going, admittedly a risky question to be posed in a chili restaurant.

Then he recognizes two men from Bridgetown sitting at the counter, who say they haven't eaten there in 12 years.

"He's the best salesman this company ever had," says John Miller.

Adds Miller's friend, Bob Callahan: "And he hasn't changed a bit."

Schmidt would appreciate that, considering he takes such pride in where he came from – a poor neighborhood in Covington.

The youngest of three boys, his father drove a truck and his mother worked part time at the school cafeteria.

"We didn't have much, I guess," says Schmidt, who still lives in Covington with his wife, Carolyn. "But I didn't know that then. Our neighbors didn't have much either."

He dropped out of Northern Kentucky University to sell commercial paper products full time. Then, at the age of 26 he got married, bought a house and took over the Gold Star franchise – all in the same month.

"It wasn't really that scary doing that all at once," says Schmidt. "When you're young enough, you just jump into it."

One of his perks over the years has been delivering food to the WLW-AM studios, which is where someone first dubbed him “Chili Rick.” Yukking it up with radio personalities has been fun, he says. Except for maybe the time the Godfather of Soul James Brown admitted, on the air, that chili gave him gas.

Schmidt has worked long, hard hours, which in part motivates him to support charity school tournaments and other community events.

“These guys come into eat and they’ve got kids playing in those tournaments,” he says. “I see them working day and night. That’s why I help them. I’ve been there.”

Schmidt now is slowly cutting back on the number of days he works at his restaurant. He’s certainly earned it.

He won’t miss making all those cheese coney. He will miss the customers who eat them.