

BUSINESS

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BUSINESS PORTFOLIO



Courtesy photo

Dan Pulver, Kelli Walton and Catherine Behnke of Guys and Dolls Photography won awards at the Professional Photographers of Michigan Convention and Print Competition.

Guys and Dolls Photography wins awards at competition

Guys and Dolls Photography of Mt. Pleasant won several awards at the annual Professional Photographers of Michigan Convention and Print Competition.

Dan Pulver, Kelli Walton and Catherine Behnke all earned honors.

Pulver earned the blue ribbon Award of Excellence on five of his photographs, placing him within the top seven for the Michigan Photographer of the Year award. He also received the 2009 Best of Show Portrait Award, which is given to the judges' favorite portrait print entered in the competition.

Walton, entering for the first time, earned the blue ribbon Award of Excellence for her print "A Silent Moment," which also earned her the Highest First Time Entry Award. She received a red ribbon award on her other three prints entered.

Behnke, also entering for the first time, received the red ribbon award on all four of her photographs entered.

All of the portraits will be on display in downtown Mt. Pleasant during the month of March.

Love earns Allstate Honor Ring award



MICHAEL LOVE

Michael Love has been recognized by Allstate Insurance Company for high standards in customer satisfaction, customer retention and profitability.

The Michael Love Agency in Mt. Pleasant is ranked as one of the top Allstate agencies in the nation in auto, property and commercial insurance and financial service sales.

Because of that, the agency achieved the distinctive Allstate Honor Ring award. For nearly 60 years, the Honor Ring has been Allstate's symbol of outstanding achievement.

BANK NOTES

Firstbank Corp. announces first quarter cash dividend

Thomas R. Sullivan, president and chief executive officer of Firstbank Corp. announced this past week that a 10 cents per share quarterly cash dividend will be paid March 19 to shareholders of record as of March 6, 2009.

The 10 cents per share cash dividend compares to 22.5 cents per share paid in the prior quarter.

Mr. Sullivan stated in a press release, "In evaluating the company's ability and capacity to pay cash dividends, the board of directors considers multiple factors including current and estimated future earnings, capital levels, economic conditions, and anticipated credit costs. The company's earnings over the recent past, which have been reduced due to a substantial increase in loan loss provisioning compounded by losses in the investment portfolio, no longer support the previous dividend level. Given the continued weak economic conditions, the board concluded that it would be most prudent to reduce the cash dividend in order to preserve and enhance Firstbank's balance sheet strength in this uncertain environment.

"This was a very difficult decision, and we want to reassure our shareholders that we are committed to positioning the company for improved earnings and performance."

Firstbank Corp., headquartered in Alma, is a financial services company with assets of \$1.4 billion and 53 banking offices in the Lower Peninsula. Bank subsidiaries include Firstbank - Alma; Firstbank (Mt. Pleasant); Firstbank - West Branch; Firstbank - St. Johns; Keystone Community Bank; and Firstbank - West Michigan.

Shark Shack opens

Owner hopes new deli proves popular in St. Louis

By LINDA GITTLEMAN
Gratiot Managing Editor

On Friday, Mike's Shark Shack opened in downtown St. Louis inside the Marathon station.

A cozy little deli, the place seats about eight. As owner Michael Clark noted - and as the name implies - he hopes to have a booming student lunch trade and carry-out business.

After all, the sharks is the St. Louis High School team nickname.

Clark is offering a substantial and varied menu that includes subs of all kinds, Rubens and Phillies, deli sandwiches on Texas toast or rye bread, chicken fingers, hot dogs, Polish dogs, sloppy joes, pizza by the slice and two different kinds of soup each day.

He'll also serve breakfast dishes, including breakfast burritos and tortillas.

Prices for the subs are from \$3 to \$4.

The store is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sundays.

A former emergency medical technician, Clark, 28, said he thought about opening the business last year, after the former owner of the short-lived Shark Shack closed it down.

"But this is a full-time job," he said, explaining he was too busy at the time. "You can't do both."

Born and raised in St. Louis, Clark said he never considered living or opening a business



Owner Michael Clark stands at the counter of his new deli, Mike's Shark Shack, in the Marathon station in St. Louis.

anywhere else.

"I'm a lifer," he said.

He said he intends to become active with the school and plans to sponsor sports teams.

He said he's had his eye on a restaurant business for some time.

"When I was 15 or 16, I worked at Jan's Pizzeria," he said. "I saw the customer relations with the whole town. I like the interaction of that."

Clark has a staff of four, including himself.

"I'll be here all the time," he said.

And what's Clark's favorite item on the menu?

"I like the deli sandwich - turkey and Swiss cheese," he said.

Mike's Shark Shack is at 220 W. Washington St. in St. Louis, just behind Kubin's.

The phone number for a take-out order is 989-681-3282.

Shark Shack

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- **Where:** 220 W. Washington St. in St. Louis
- **Phone:** 989-681-3282.
- **Hours:** 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sundays.

Peanut-butter recall hurts small businesses

By EMILY FREDRIX
AP Food Industry Writer

MILWAUKEE — To Betsy Sanders, the nationwide salmonella outbreak tied to peanut butter has been a hurricane. Her tiny cookie dough business is part of the debris.

Reimbursing customers for recalled products has already cost her Dough-To-Go Inc. business as much as \$7,000, she says - a big chunk for a company that turned little profit last year. She also has 2,500 pounds of peanut butter that she can't use because it came from Peanut Corp. of America - the company that was the source of the outbreak and that has since filed for bankruptcy protection.

"We're the victim, too," said Sanders, who started the business off an idea her son had at age 12. "We've done nothing wrong and we're doing everything we can to make sure everyone's safe."

With at least nine deaths suspected of being tied to the outbreak, hundreds of people sickened and thousands of products recalled, companies from name brands like Kellogg Co. down to small ones like Dough-To-Go have been affected. But while big companies have equally large public relations departments, smaller ones have limited budgets and fewer ways to cope.

Meanwhile, Blakely, Ga., home of the Peanut Corp. of America processing plant that produced the tainted peanut butter, feels the ripple effect of the company's bankruptcy. As workers lose their jobs, they have less to spend at other businesses.

The timing could hardly be worse, as the recession has crimped how much people are spending.

Sanders, who has run the Santa Clara, Calif.-based business for 26 years with her son, said she's worried about the half of her sales - which reached a total of \$1.7 million last year - that come from school groups like the PTA or marching bands for fundraisers that help pay for



Fred Large talks about the closing of the Peanut Corp. of America processing plant while at his Smitty's Grill off the square in Blakely, Ga.. The peanut butter plant that produced the suspect peanut paste is a major employer here, and many of its workers are out of jobs.

uniforms and school trips.

The peak selling season for that starts next month. But parents could be leery of buying anything at all with peanut butter.

The outbreak has already forced the maker of Detour energy bars, Forward Foods LLC, to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. The Minden, Nev.-based company plans to stay in business but needs money to pay to replace recalled products.

Meanwhile, even companies that didn't have to recall products still have plenty to worry about.

Jarred peanut butter sales have been tumbling, even though that category has generally not been involved in the recalls. In the four weeks ending Jan. 24, about 33.8 million pounds of peanut butter in jars were sold - a 22 percent drop from the same period last year. It's too soon to tell, whether

those kinds of declines are because stores are pulling items off the shelves or because consumers are turning away from peanut butter products, said Todd Hale, senior vice president for consumer and shopper insights at Nielsen.

"Generally speaking, any time we have a scare like this, there are probably more manufacturers that are hurt than should be," he said.

Girl Scouts of the USA, whose member troops sell a total of 200 million boxes of cookies a year worth \$700 million, won't know for months what effect the nervousness had on its sales, said spokeswoman Michelle Tompkins. About one-fourth of its cookies contain peanut butter.

People like Nina Perez-Bauschka have put a lid on their peanut butter spending. The 34-year-old mother of two in Grayson, Ga. recently scraped her last jar clean and doesn't know what she's going to do now.

"I want to, but I'm afraid," she said of buying more peanut butter. "I know it sounds so silly, but I'm afraid."

Lance Inc., the maker of the nation's best-selling peanut butter crackers, saw its sales dip after the outbreak - it won't say by how much - but says they rebounded after the company launched a campaign to tell consumers its products are safe.

The Charlotte, N.C.-based company's 4,800 employees make it nearly one-twentieth the size of the nation's largest food maker, Kraft Foods Inc. The small company went from doing practically no marketing in 2008 to taking out half-page ads in 50 newspapers, setting up a Web site - www.lancecracker-saresafe.com - and putting up video on YouTube featuring Chief Executive Dave Singer talking about how the company makes peanut butter and its safety methods.