**A brown building with many windows

AI-generated content may be incorrect.**

**the Legacy Alive: Kristel Witty and the Story of Happy Joe’s**

Some businesses are more than just places to eat—they become a part of people’s lives, shaping memories and bringing communities together. Happy Joe’s, the iconic pizza chain, is one such establishment, built on the vision and passion of its founder, Happy Joe Whitty. Now, his daughter Kristel Witty carries on his legacy, ensuring that Happy Joe’s continues to thrive while embracing the future.

**The Origins of Happy Joe’s**

The story of Happy Joe’s begins with Joe Whitty, a North Dakota farm boy with an entrepreneurial spirit and a love for people. His journey in the restaurant industry started humbly, working at a North Dakota eatery called The Keg, where he quickly rose to managing the business. His natural charisma and business acumen led him to opportunities in both the bakery industry and restaurant management, eventually bringing him to Iowa, where he found his true passion—pizza.

Inspired by his experiences at Shakey’s Pizza, Joe saw an opportunity to create a family-friendly pizza restaurant that wasn’t just about food but about fun, celebration, and inclusivity. In 1972, he opened the first Happy Joe’s in Davenport, Iowa, and from the start, he wanted it to be different. He pioneered ideas like birthday celebrations, free beer while waiting in line, and unique pizza creations—most notably, the now-famous Happy Joe’s Special: Canadian Bacon and Sauerkraut Pizza.

**A Family Business with a Mission**

For the Whitty family, Happy Joe’s was more than just a business—it was a way of life. Kristel and her siblings grew up in the restaurant, learning the ins and outs of the business from an early age. Their father’s infectious enthusiasm and tireless work ethic inspired them, and Kristel, despite initially pursuing a career in acting and music, eventually found her way back to the family business.

One of Joe’s greatest passions was helping children with special needs. His kindness and inclusivity were evident from the start when he welcomed a mother and her child with disabilities into his restaurant. That moment sparked a lifelong commitment, leading to the creation of the Happy Joe’s Kids Foundation, which continues to support children with special needs today.

**Keeping the Spirit of Happy Joe’s Alive**

Now, over 50 years since its founding, Happy Joe’s remains a beloved brand, and Kristel has played a pivotal role in preserving its core values while guiding it into the future. The restaurant chain has expanded internationally, with locations in Egypt, Dubai, and other Middle Eastern countries, as well as upcoming expansions in Florida, Texas, and Arizona.

Despite these changes, the essence of Happy Joe’s remains the same—a place where families can come together, celebrate, and enjoy great food. Signature elements, such as the train running through the restaurant, the signature birthday horn, and the family-friendly atmosphere, continue to make Happy Joe’s a special place for multiple generations.

**Lessons from Kristel and the Happy Joe’s Legacy**

Kristel’s journey in the family business offers valuable lessons for entrepreneurs and those working in family-owned companies:

1. **Stay True to Your Brand’s Identity** – While growth and innovation are essential, maintaining the heart of a brand is what keeps loyal customers coming back.
2. **Embrace Change While Honoring the Past** – Expanding to new markets means adapting to different cultures while keeping the Happy Joe’s spirit alive.
3. **Give Back to the Community** – The Happy Joe’s Kids Foundation and the brand’s dedication to inclusivity show that a business can make a meaningful impact.
4. **Recognize Everyone’s Strengths** – In a family business, finding the right roles for each member based on their strengths creates a stronger organization.
5. **Have Fun and Create Experiences** – People don’t just remember food; they remember how they felt. Making guests feel welcome and special is the secret to long-term success.

**Looking Ahead**

Kristel Witty continues to help guide Happy Joe’s into its next chapter, ensuring that her father’s legacy of joy, generosity, and great pizza lives on. With new locations, innovative menu ideas, and a commitment to the community, Happy Joe’s is set to bring happiness to even more families around the world.

For Kristel, it’s not just about running a business—it’s about keeping a tradition of happiness, inclusion, and celebration alive for generations to come.