

THE AXE FACTOR

LOCAL LAWYER IS A MASTER IN COMPETITIVE AXE THROWING

BY JILL DEVINE | PHOTOS BY ASTRI WEE

Like most attorneys, Suzanne Bassett flings a heavy satchel over her shoulder when she leaves her office for the day. But sometimes Suzie, as her friends call her, isn't simply carrying a big load of case files to review.

"You never know what a woman has in her bag," laughed Bassett, as she opened it to reveal a gleaming collection of hatchets, axes and knives.

Those eye-opening implements have made it through baggage checks at airports across the country. That's because, at press time, Bassett is the top-ranked female in the World Axe Throwing League. When you include men, she's still No. 53 overall – out of more than 5,000 active league participants worldwide.

TARGET: ATHLETICS

"I've always been competitive, both academically and in sports," said Bassett, who lives in the Broadlands.

At her upstate New York high school, she was a straight-A student and class valedictorian, and she earned seven varsity letters as a field hockey goalie, softball pitcher and volleyball middle player.

She moved to Ashburn about 10 years ago, graduated cum laude from the American University Washington College of Law and now specializes in food and drug law as an associate attorney for the Polsinelli law firm in Washington.

Bassett thinks her athletic background conditioned her to be good at axe throwing,



a sport rooted in lumberjack traditions that didn't formally exist until the early 2000s.

"I've used my wrists my whole life, controlling slight movements to get a ball to do what I want it to do," she explained. "Understanding how my wrist works and having control over my arm helps me throw accurately."



A NEW TALENT

An invite to a scavenger hunt a few years ago led Bassett to discover axe throwing.

"I was working late and couldn't go, so my friend suggested I meet with them afterward at an axe throwing place in D.C.," she said. "I showed up in a dress and had no idea what I was doing. A guy handed me an axe and told me to throw it, and I surprised everyone by immediately being pretty good at it."

Bassett started winning competitions in Washington before joining a league in Baltimore.

In 2019, Bassett read about a new axe throwing venue, Axes and O's, that was opening in Sterling. She reached out to the owners about throwing there.

"Watching Suzie throw, I could tell right away, from her form and concentration, that she knew what she was doing," said Tara Hampton, the owner of Axes and O's. "Being a lawyer, Suzie is very persuasive, and she convinced me to start a social league, even though I wasn't sure we were ready. We started with about 12 people, but as pandemic restrictions eased, we quickly grew to more than 50 for the Thursday night league."

ARMED & READY

Bassett's heavily padded competition bag currently holds nine customized axes and hatchets and a set of knives, although she says she owns about 50 related tools total. Competition disciplines are categorized as Hatchet, Big Axe or Duals, with appropriate rules and tools for each.

"Everyone loves to watch Duals," she said. "It's the most fun because two people throw at the same target at the same time, and sometimes even the best of us screws up and hits each other's axe. There's more fun and chaos at Duals – anything can happen."

Her favorite axes have custom wooden handles created by fellow Axes and O's thrower David Kline, owner of DMV Axes. Because she uses a pinch grip when throwing, Bassett prefers square handles that won't rotate like round handles.

“He just made one for me with a design like the lace on Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s collar,” Bassett said. She paired it with her favorite leather blade sheath that has RBG’s portrait on one side and an image of the Supreme Court on the other. “RBG is my idol,” she said.

AIMING TO WIN

Bassett has earned a bid to the World Axe Throwing Championships in Appleton, Wisc., in December. She qualified in all three disciplines.

“I take pride that I do very well in a male-dominated sport,” Bassett said. “There are no gender differences in axe throwing. We play in the same leagues, compete in the same tournaments, and I don’t get a handicap.”

Bassett has won or placed in quite a few different tournaments in the past few years. She took third place at the Tilted Axes Spring Fling, a coed WATL-sanctioned tournament in West Chester, Penn., and was the highest ranking woman in that contest. She won second in the coed Rustbelt Rumble in Rochester, N.Y., beaten only by the reigning world champion. And →



SUZIE BASSETT
OFFERS UP SOME

AXE THROWING ADVICE



DON'T BE AFRAID TO TRY.
Don't be put off by an image of bearded men in plaid shirts. That's not what the community is. There are lots of axe throwing venues so give it a try.

REPETITION IS KEY.

Throw and repeat. When you're under pressure at a tournament, you need that muscle memory. Just keep throwing.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHANGE UP SOMETHING THAT'S NOT WORKING.

A lot of players plateau, but they aren't willing to change a handle or change their throw. That's the best time to try something different.

DON'T THROW IT LIKE A BASEBALL.

People try to throw it hard, to throw it through the wall, but you don't have to do that. The harder you throw, the less control you have. People who make the big stage are throwing relatively softly.





earlier this year, she took the title in the Queen of the South competition, a women's tournament in Tyler, Texas.

As a woman in a male-dominated sport, Bassett is breaking new ground.

"Suzie is currently the top-ranked female in our sport, competing in multiple disciplines against anyone that steps up to the line," said Mike Morton, commissioner of the World Axe Throwing League. "[She is] consistently proving that success in axe throwing is not tied to one specific gender."

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Bassett credits her success to consistent practice, her willingness to change her throw or try a new axe as needed, and her ability to channel stress into energy that works to her advantage in competitions.

"Suzie's game is always about what she needs to do with her throw, not who she is throwing against," said Russell Murphy, Bassett's duals partner and boyfriend.

Murphy recalled how focused Bassett was at a tournament where she was competing against one of the top throwers in the



(Left) One of Suzie's axes safely tucked away in a sheath featuring the image of her idol, former Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. (Below) Suzie and a group of fellow axe throwers celebrate a victory in a competition.



PHOTOS PROVIDED



world, Mark Tishko.

"It was insanely close, and they almost threw a perfect game," said Murphy, referring to a score of 64. "Suzie lost two matches to him, but she threw two of her best games – 62 and 63 – in a row."

Prizes aren't usually huge when compared to many other sporting events. They can range from hundreds of dollars up to thousands at major tournaments. Bassett took home roughly \$1,000 in 2021 and, because she has competed a bit less this year, she's taken home roughly \$600 so far.

Fortunately, Bassett says thanks to her day job as an attorney, she has the luxury of worrying less about the cash prizes and focusing more on inspiring her fellow female throwers as well as encouraging more women to join the league and helping them find sponsors to cover costs.

"Most of the time, the men are on the podium. Very rarely do women win any money," Bassett said. "So my goal is to go there and do my best and make a splash for women in the tournament – and make some men nervous." ■

Jill Devine is a freelance writer and former magazine editor from Loudoun County who writes for a variety of Virginia publications.

Poof!

Business born from the pandemic brings beignets to Ashburn

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH

“Poofy.”
“Pillowy.”
“Pillow poofiness.”

These are some of the words Scott Bilstad comes up with as he tries to describe his signature beignets. His secret ingredient: time – letting the dough proof, or rest, longer than a typical baker might.

“We do a 12-hour proof,” he said. “We let the dough proof overnight so it can leaven and so you get that nice pillow poofiness.”



(Below) The Bilstad family — Jenny, Harper, 6, Greta, 4, and Scott.



LAVELLE HOUSE/BLUE SUGAR PHOTOGRAPHY

And it must be working because he and his wife, Jenny, sell so many beignets that they are about to open their first bakery café right in the heart of Ashburn.

It’s been a winding road for Bilstad’s Beignets, which will be at 20937 Ashburn Road, Suite 150 – likely opening in September. The purveyor of the famous puffed French pastry – pronounced “ben-yay” – got its start back in the depths of the pandemic.

Scott had been furloughed from his job with U.S. Foods. The Navy veteran and longtime executive chef was champing at the bit for something to do besides spend all day with the couple’s two young children.

“I’ve walked our neighborhood 800 times – it’s two square blocks. And I can’t watch anymore Disney Jr.,” Jenny recalled Scott saying. “I’ve got to cook.”

While doughnuts may be quintessentially American, Scott knew from experience that beignets usually sold better. And he knew how to make them. So, in April 2020, the Bilstads, who live in Purcellville, put up a post on their neighborhood Facebook page to see whether anyone was interested. They expected maybe 10 people to respond. Instead, they got 75 orders for beignets the first day.

The couple started taking orders and customers would swing by and pick them up. Word spread, it got shared on social media and less than a month later they had sold 4,500 of the powdered pastries. ☺



LAVELLE HOUSE/BLUE SUGAR PHOTOGRAPHY

Soon they were doing pop-up stands at wineries and breweries – business was booming.

“We started doing grab bags, three beignets in a bag,” Jenny said with a laugh. “You can take those and eat those in the car, and no one will know you had any. So, people would do that while they were driving a dozen home to their family.”

Leslie Recinos, who lives in Ashburn’s Loudoun Valley Estates neighborhood, is a friend of the Bilstads but wasn’t a natural customer for them.

“I am not a sweets person at all,” Recinos said. “I like more salty and savory. But their beignets are my one go-to treat. They are the perfect amount of sweet, and I love how fresh they are.”

Eventually, Jenny and Scott realized they had to get out of their house and into a dedicated kitchen. Thus, the birth of Bilstad’s Beignets brick-and-mortar café in Ashburn. With his culinary background, Scott is handling all the beignet prep and baking. Jenny, who also has extensive experience in restaurants, continues to work at Fortessa, a major restaurant supply company based in Ashburn. But she will be handling the business side of Bilstad’s Beignets.

The menu at Bilstad’s will be exceedingly simple. Beignets. Hot and cold brew coffee. And dippers – flavor cups you can dunk

(Above) The Bilstad family sprinkles powdered sugar on some fresh beignets. (Right) A pop-up stand displaying Bilstad’s beignets and dipping sauces.



your beignet in. The starting line-up of dippers will include fudgy chocolate, strawberry cardamom, wild blueberry, bourbon caramel and vanilla mango.

Scott also says to look for flavored and filled beignets soon. They’ve already done some experimenting to great success.

“We did a pumpkin beignet around October. We did a gingerbread beignet in December,” he said. “We did a peanut butter fluff-filled beignet – the fluffernutter.”

Roe Sommer, a resident of Ashburn Farm and local real estate agent, teamed up with the Bilstads for a fundraiser to support the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, a condition that has affected both families. Sommer admits folks thought it was funny to sell sugary beignets to raise money for diabetes research, but she is nevertheless thrilled about the new café.

“They are absolutely scrumptious. They melt in your mouth,” Sommer said. “Jenny and Scott are great people and I’m really excited about them coming to Ashburn. They will be right around the corner, and we can get beignets whenever we want.”

That increased availability is one of the things the Bilstads are counting on. Before, people had to place orders and arrange pick-ups. Now Wednesdays through Sundays, the café will be open, and people can stop by on their own schedule.

And the hope is that guests will come in, perhaps with a friend, sit at one of the café’s small tables and just have a respite from the busyness of life.

“A bad day or a great day – a cup of coffee and a beignet will warm you up,” Jenny said. “Even better – share a beignet with a friend. It’s half the calories and twice the fun.” **A**



FUEL FOR SUCCESS



MEET THE BROTHERS BEHIND ASHBURN'S RESTAURANT AND GAS STATION EMPIRE

BY CHRIS WADSWORTH



It's a name nearly every Ashburn resident will recognize immediately — Rubino. As in Rubino's Pizzeria, the popular restaurant with two locations in Ashburn — in Ashburn Village and in the Broadlands.

But the pizza joints are just scratching the surface of the small but growing business empire that the Rubino brothers — yes, there are three of them — have built in Northern Virginia. Three restaurants at the moment and six gas stations — the three latest gas stations featuring the new Filling Co. Gas & Grub convenience store concept. That's nine separate locations around the region — with hints of more to come.

For the Rubinos, family is a key to everything they have accomplished. Be it the legacy of their Italian grandmother to the jobs they worked together in high school, it all proved to be a bit of foreshadowing of what was to come.

Steve Rubino is the oldest at 59 and the spokesman for the group. His brother, Rick, is 57 and David is 54. They live in Willowsford, Belmont Country Club and Aldie, respectively. They grew up in Burke and all attended West Springfield High School and George Mason University.

Steve and Rick both worked at a local seafood restaurant as teenagers. Meanwhile, David managed a gas station in Springfield. A restaurant. A gas station. Their career path was already laid out before them.

In 1987, the brothers went in together to open their first restaurant in the Bailey's Crossroads area of Fairfax. The restaurant was a franchise location of the Mr. Hero sub shop chain. Business was good, and they opened a second Mr. Hero location in 1992 in the Village Center at Dulles in Herndon. Many people know that as the "clocktower center" for the retail and office building there with giant clocks on top.

Meanwhile, with David's familiarity and connections in the gas station business, the brothers opened a Mobil station in Herndon in 2002.

"In the beginning, it was definitely challenging because it was all new," David said about opening a gas station compared to a sandwich shop. "Getting your hands wrapped around operating a convenience store was a different concept, but after a while, I really enjoyed it."

While David managed the service station, Steve and Rick plotted a path forward on the restaurant side of things — a path that was about to see a big switchover.

After 17 years with the Mr. Hero brand, the Rubinos closed their original location and converted the Herndon spot into their first Rubino's Pizzeria. That was in 2004, and a second Rubino's location followed in Ashburn's Ashbrook Commons shopping center in 2008 and the Broadlands Marketplace (better known as Southern Walk) location in 2012.

"My heritage is Italian and at the time [2004], there wasn't really any pizza out there [in Herndon]," Steve said. "I had some good recipes from my grandmother — especially our meatball recipe and our tomato sauce recipe. That was the food we grew up on."

The pizza has become a staple of Ashburn life — certainly for local sports teams who flock to the restaurants for team parties. The restaurant also won Best Pizza in the 2022 Best of Ashburn contest.

Cindy Mayer of the Broadlands has three sons and, like

(Top) The interior of a Filling Co. Gas & Grub location in Ashburn; (bottom) some of the food items available at the Filling Co.



CINDY MAYER

many parents, she has been to a lot of events at Rubino's over the years.

"We love the BBQ Chicken and Bacon pizza," she said. "We have always loved going [there] after basketball season for team celebrations. The kids enjoy the pizza and Ices and the parents can even get adult beverages."

As the years ticked by, the Rubinos also added two gas stations to their portfolio — the Shell station in the Lansdowne Town Center and the then-Shell station at Ashbrook Commons.

Things were quiet for a time, and the brothers enjoyed owning and operating the various entities they had created. But another big change was just around the corner — one driven by a competitive edge that underlies the Rubinos' calm outward demeanor.

Developers announced plans to build a new shopping center immediately next to Ashbrook Commons. The new center — Ashbrook Marketplace — would have a whole new line-up of stores and restaurants. Even more challenging, a gas station was planned for the parcel of land kitty corner from the Rubino's Shell station. There was going to be a literal stone's throw between the two stations.

And there was nothing the Rubinos could do about it — until they came up with an audacious plan. They would eliminate the competition by taking over the second gas station site themselves and owning two gas stations basically facing each other.

“They were putting a gas station in there, come hell or high water,” Steve said. “So, in order to protect our interests, we went ahead and did a deal [with the developer] and opened the new Shell station.”

The brothers ultimately moved their Rubinos location to the new center as well. Meanwhile, they switched their old station to the BP brand, and moved the Shell brand to the new, larger station they built just 100 yards away.

“Wonderful, hardworking brothers.” That’s how Diana Shipley describes the Rubinos. She’s a vice president of leasing with Saul Centers, a local developer and shopping center operator that has done deals with the Rubinos. “They have invested in Loudoun County by delivering quality buildings and excellent service to the communities they serve. It is not easy to operate with the demand for items and the labor shortage, yet they have a successful formula.”

The Rubinos also wanted to do something more than a typical convenience store. The brothers felt they had to have something to compete with the big guys like Wawa and Sheetz.

“We needed a food concept,” Steve said. “We had the food background. We knew what we were doing. So, we created the Filling Company.”

From the ground up, the brothers created the Gas & Grub concept. They worked with designers to create the convenience store brand, the logo, the décor and everything else that goes into an enterprise of that magnitude.

“Not being a designer myself, in the beginning, some of the [artist renderings] were frustrating. They weren’t where I wanted to go,” David remembered. “Then all of a sudden, this gentleman presented us with something that we thought was wonderful and we ran with it.”

That winning design was created by Total Image Creative, a Maryland-based firm. However, when it came to the food, the Rubino brothers handled that themselves. Sub sandwiches. Pizza. Burgers. Fries. And perhaps most importantly — their signature cheesesteak sandwich.

“That’s a big item for us,” Steve said. “We sell more cheesesteaks than pizza. It’s a real big mover for us.”

They also have a Bavarian-style soft pretzel, deep-fried Oreos and creamy milkshakes. But if you’re watching what you eat — don’t worry. There are options like wraps, salads and even acai bowls.



ROXANNA URBAN

Roxanna Urban, who lives in Ashburn’s Village of Waxpool neighborhood, was one such customer who was surprised by the offerings at the Filling Co.

“My daughters and I stopped in after school and grabbed some snacks. I was so pleased to see some healthier alternatives on the menu,” Urban said. She called her acai bowl

“fresh” and “delicious.” “[It was] not the quality of food I would normally expect to get at a convenience store or gas station — so much better.”

The Rubinos also stock their store shelves with a bevy of unique items — things not always seen at convenience stores around Ashburn. Sure, they have Doritos and bottles of Coca-Cola. But there’s also Van Leeuwen brand ice cream from New York City and Nightingale ice cream sandwiches from →



PHOTO BY ASTRID WEE PHOTOGRAPHY



KIM ADAMS

Richmond. Beer labels like Sycamore Juice Willis and 3 Floyds Zombie Dust. And Lone Oak coffee roasted in Winchester.

“Customers notice that this is not your average convenience store,” Steve said. “One of our biggest challenges ... is that we want to put out very high-quality menu items with high quality ingredients, but the c-store business is very price sensitive. Not to single out 7-Eleven, but when you walk into a 7-Eleven, you don’t have very high expectations. That was an obstacle for us. We wanted to put out a higher-end product, but we couldn’t necessarily charge for it. So, it’s been a lot of work trying to find the right balance.”

The Rubinos opened three Filling Co. locations in quick succession — all in Ashburn. The first one at Ashbrook Marketplace, followed by one at the Brambleton Town Center and one near the corner of Northstar Boulevard and Evergreen Mills

Road. This was all done during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic — something Steve called “a challenge.”

“The Rubino brothers have been extremely successful catering to people who are busy and on the go,” said Kim Adams, director of marketing for the developer of the Brambleton community, where two of the new Filling Co. stores are located. “They have mastered the concept of providing convenient — and delicious — food.”

Meanwhile, plans are afoot to close the Rubino’s in Herndon. That location had a strong lunch business with local office workers. But COVID-19 and the work-from-home trend did a number on the sales, and the Rubinos are eager to move on.

As far as other future plans — Steve Rubino will discuss some, but not others. They may seek to turn their Shell station in Lansdowne into a Filling Co. location, but there’s nothing firm on that yet. Meanwhile, they have some other plans afoot — ones that Ashburn residents will probably find very interesting — but the details aren’t for public consumption yet.

Regardless of what comes next, the Rubinos know one thing — they’re in it together. Three brothers, working side by side for more than three decades.

“It can be difficult at times,” Steve said. “But the bottom line is that we all have the common goal of being successful. You can trust your family. You can be sure they always have your back. It’s not like an outsider coming in and taking over management or ownership. Family is trust.” ■