

All in the family: A family of Hornets powers the Vestal Coal House

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Fridays are a quiet time on the Vestal Rail trail, Mark and Eileen Mushalla say. But even in the midst of that quiet, the trail has no shortage of visitors.

Walkers amble, chatting with friends, as the occasional runner jogs by. A bicycle glides past. And at the far end, customers duck into the historic [Vestal Coal House](#) where Eileen stands behind a glossy wood counter, chatting with customers and putting together an assortment of tasty and nutritious treats.

“She’s the boss,” her son Andy says, as the family gathers for a photo.

For the Mushalla family, the Rail Trail is more than just a place to get a good run – although the fitness-friendly family does that, too. It’s the home of the expanding family business, in all its manifestations: café and special events, bookkeeping and space rental.

The family also has a shared tradition as proud Hornets. Both Mark and Eileen are SUNY Broome graduates, as are six of their nine children. Another, Elijah, will attend SUNY Broome this fall to study business. And Mark and Eileen wouldn’t be surprised if their two youngest – Julie, a sophomore in high school with a sharp interest in business, and 9-year-old Manny, adopted from Guatemala – ended up as Hornets, too.

“What a great stepping stone. That’s why we send out kids there, too,” said Mark Mushalla, vice president and chief financial officer of construction firm William H. Lane Inc. “Those two years are so important.”



Members of the Mushalla family at the Vestal Coal House



A SUNY Broome tradition

Like many young students, Mark Mushalla had felt a bit hazy about the future. The local community college turned out to be a good place to get his bearings and find his future path.

“I was a pretty good student but I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I wasn’t ready to go to college,” he remembered.

He majored in accounting, while Eileen earned her degree in chemical engineering technology. Both transferred to Binghamton University, where they completed bachelor’s degrees in accounting and chemistry, respectively. Mark, a certified public accountant (CPA), has been with William H. Lane, since 1985, while Eileen took care of their family. He also teaches at Binghamton University.

While their college-age progeny all chose SUNY Broome, they ultimately chose their own paths. Some chose to

go directly into the work force, while others continued their education at the Mushallas' other alma mater, BU. Some work at the family business, and others find their main employment elsewhere.

Their oldest son, Matt, graduated with a degree in criminal justice and has a job in security at Lourdes Hospital. Sons Andy and Alex both work in the family business – more on that in a bit – while brother Chris went on to attend BU, currently works for government and is aiming to become a CPA himself.

Daughter Alyssa, who also works at the Coal House, will graduate from BU in September with a degree in Human Development. Son Nick recently completed his Criminal Justice degree at SUNY Broome and is transferring to BU. Elijah will attend SUNY Broome this fall, and perhaps Julie and Manny in years to come.

“It’s a home away from home for everyone,” Mark Mushalla said of SUNY Broome.

The family business

The idea for the family business came, appropriately enough, during a run.

Mark Mushalla spotted the Town of Vestal’s request for proposals to privatize the Coal House, a historic building from the town’s railroad days that was moved to its current location on the Rail Trail but then sat vacant for several years.

“On the run back, I had so many ideas,” remembered Mushalla, who submitted his proposal to develop the site in 2012. He was granted a 10-year licensing agreement with the town, which he hopes will be renewed down the road.

Since then, the Mushallas have developed the property into a popular gathering place with three components. The upstairs office space has been renovated, and is available for rentals. It also houses a bookkeeping and accounting business, staffed full-time by Andy and Alex, who also split their time with the Coal House’s other operations.

The two have different strengths. Alex is the numbers whiz, with a natural affinity for bookkeeping. Andy has his talents on the creative side, from developing events to marketing materials.

“They multi-task, which they learned at Broome,” Mark Mushalla said of the two. “You’ve got to wear a lot of different hats.”

Below, the café offers a wide range of goodies, largely from March through October and whenever the Rail Trail hosts events. It’s the last portion – special events – that have proved the most popular, including Wednesday night workouts, the performances of Patio Palooza, comedy nights and many, many races. Events are held even in the dead of winter – in snow, wind, rain and hail (although lightning is a deal-breaker). They’re well-attended, too.

“People want to get outside,” Mark Mushalla said.

During the summer months, the Coal House has events or activities virtually every night of the week to draw interest and customers. And it’s working. Friday, once the slowest night for Rail Trail use, now has its own draw: a workout group for seniors.

While Eileen is the operations manager for the café, Andy holds that position for special events. The Coal House partners with nonprofits and local businesses; UHS and Excellus, for example, underwrite the Wednesday night workouts. Special events aren’t just limited to the Rail Trail, either; the Mushallas have taken their show on the road and staged a race at Otsiningo Park in Dickinson.

Back in the café, Eileen uses her chemistry skills to put together healthy smoothies, many of them her own concoctions.

“A little bit of this, and a little bit of that. It’s kind of like a lab,” she joked.

The Coal House has been a major change for her, too; after raising nine children, it marks her re-entry into the world of employment. She didn’t originally envision herself working there when Mark presented the idea, at least not often.

“I thought maybe I’d work here 12 hours at the most,” she mused.

Instead, she’s been the café’s powerhouse, making decisions about the use of resources and recipes. It’s been a challenge, she noted, adding that she had never studied business in college. But as a runner, she appreciates challenges.

“You learn perseverance,” she said. “I learned to have a lot of perseverance through running and through school, too.”

What does the future hold for this family of Hornets and their multifaceted business venture? Mark Mushalla isn’t entirely sure, but he’s optimistic. Wherever their ventures take them, the Mushallas will undoubtedly apply the skills, knowledge and perseverance they learned at SUNY Broome to make their visions a reality.

“The family business is going to go where they want it to go. In terms of how this develops, it’s up to all the family members who work here,” he said. “If you work here, you’ve got to be in with both feet.”

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