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'Pam the butcher' - a cut above the rest

by **William Treger**
Staff Writer

The nickname sounds tough but at Wagshal's Market on Massachusetts Avenue, top D.C. butcher Pamela Ginsberg is affectionately known as "Pam the butcher."

A woman in a profession dominated by men, Ginsberg started cutting meat at 7 years old, when she broke her first side of beef with her father, Stephen, a World War II and Korean War veteran who went to work as a butcher after returning from overseas.

Ginsberg spent summers working with her father in the District's Eastern Market, along with her siblings Douglas, who worked as a butcher after serving in Vietnam; Michael, a lifelong butcher; and Kathy, who eventually married a butcher. Ginsberg's mother, Dorothy, took care of the whole crew.

Ginsberg's father died when young Pam was 14 years old. She was in the ninth grade, and signed out of school for two months to run the business. Ginsberg completed her schoolwork and made deposits for the business on Mondays, and cut meats Tuesday through Saturday.

From her father, Ginsberg learned that customer service was at the heart of any successful business operation. The Ginsbergs took care of business, wrapping deliveries up special for each and every one of their customers, and delivering custom-cut meats to homes.

On a beautiful Friday afternoon, in Wagshal's outdoor seating area, Pam the butcher greets every one of her customers and delivery men by name, or a friendly "hey, babe" or "darling."

"These customers can go any place they want and spend their money. But these people that come to Wagshal's today have come here for generations."

Wagshal's Deli was founded in 1925. German-born butcher and businessman Bill Fuch's bought the deli in 1990 and built the butcher shop in 1995 in a bookstore property in the same shopping center on Massachusetts Ave., followed by a large kitchen facility in 2000.

Fuchs calls Ginsberg a "tremendous talent." "She has a big heart," with an overwillingness to overextend herself, he says.

"Past employers would let her exhaust herself, but we have provided her a support system and given her room to work her strengths in customer service," he says.

According to Ginsberg, 48, being a butcher "has been my life, my whole life, and coming here to Wagshal's, for the first time in my working career, all the hard work in my past has paid off."

"I've been at places where I've been the horse," she says. "I did it all, they knew that I was going to do it all, but I wasn't very well taken care of at the time. I was a woman in a man's world."

"No one has taken such good care of me as Wagshal's has. They make sure that I still have a good quality of life. They make sure that I have the right tools and the right support to make what I do shine."

Ginsberg has been at Wagshal's since 1997.

"I am the lead butcher here. I run the market, but I am the butcher. Pam the butcher - for 25 years."

"One day, this little girl came running down the aisle and she saw me and she tripped. You know those linoleum floors, you can hear her knees scraping, and I said, 'Are you okay,' and she said 'I'm okay Pam the butcher.' And I said, 'Oh my God, that's my name!'"

Wagshal's specialties include its pastrami and its kosher hot dog, voted number one hot dog in several D.C. publications including City Paper, Washingtonian, and The Washington Post.

Recently, Pam has been cutting a lot of exotics. The District is a transient place, she says, and appetites are wide and far-ranging. "For example, New Zealanders in town want kangaroo," she says.

Ginsberg cuts alligator, pythons, rattlesnake. (The rattlesnake has absolutely no fat, she says, it goes best with something spicy and citrusy.)

"For the major holidays, we work 18 hour days just to get the job done; our guys just keep going - there is no Pam the butcher without these guys."

"We're blessed to have her here," says Fuchs, the owner, who prides himself on Wagshal's customer service. "We take purchases to the cash register with our customers, chat with them, ask about purchases, previous purchases. We do not have a big market feel."

"The end result of everything is that we're all a cut above," says Ginsberg.

"People ask me, 'Are you happy at Wagshal's?' And I say it's at the top of the food train in Washington. We have a true passion for what we're doing. Several local chefs come to Wagshal's because we have things they can't get on their own - carcass beef, carcass lamb and veal."

"So, is my favorite part of the job buying that special piece of meat and seeing it come in? Or when I cut a piece of meat, and I get the goosebumps, and I say 'Do you see what I see?' Or is it a beautiful piece of fish, and I think 'Wow, I had my hand in buying this, and I'm going to make sure it now goes home in someone's hand and I tell them how to cook it.' And my team - these guys have fed off how I'm customer-service-oriented and hungry for knowledge."

Forty years in the business and Pam the Butcher is quite content. "I'm at the best butcher shop with the best products and I've worked my entire life at this. I am blessed and fortunate to be here. I know my parents would be very proud of me."



Pamela Ginsberg, "Pam the butcher," has been working at Wagshal's Deli since 1997.

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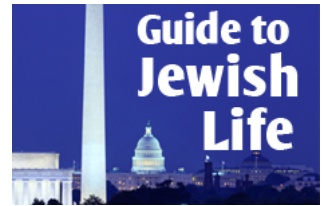
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