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Personalities of Pittsburgh: Abdullah Salem, community grocer

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Abdullah Salem is a rare find in the contemporary grocery business. As the 40-year-old owner of Salem's Market and Grill who took what was a small Oakland store and grew it into a 10,700-square-foot restaurant and market in the Strip District, Salem personifies the local grocer, one who talks about his business and his community in the same breath, the joint success of each the same to him.

While it was his father who first launched Salem's in Oakland in the early 1980s, Salem drove the major move to a much larger store in the Strip District. That move, just before the neighborhood became Robotics Row, proved to be wildly successful, achieving sales Salem says reach \$1,000 a square foot. Now, the city has chosen Salem's for a 31,500-square-foot location in the Hill District to replace a closed Shop 'n Save store.



JIM HARRIS/PBT

Abudlla Salem in front of Salem's Market and Grill on Penn Ave in the strip district.

Tell me about how Salem's Market first started.

When Salem's started, we opened up in 1981 (near) the University of Pittsburgh campus. My dad actually started the business for a need of halal meat for himself.

I have to assume that it's probably still not easy to find in western Pennsylvania outside of your store.

It's difficult. We have people come to us who say they didn't eat meat for six months because (they) live in a small town and couldn't find it.

What has it taken to establish Salem's as a business?

We've always had that mentality that we are part of the community and we are the center of the international community. It's not just the Muslim community, but the international community as a whole. Every person knows Salem's. I can't leave the store because people need me.

What was it like to move from Oakland to the Strip District?

In Oakland, we were in 1,400 square feet. We had grown very fast in Oakland. We became an integral part of Oakland. Then there was a huge friction in Oakland because of parking. I told my dad we're going to find the most industrial space where no one can bother us. We can run trucks all night. It had to be the Strip District. I was lucky enough to find this building, 2923 Penn Avenue — 100% of everybody was against me. My dad. My brothers. My sister. Every person said this is a bad area. You have a bar on one side and Lawrenceville on the next. ... Yet I was 100% convinced.

Then what happened?

And by God's grace, the area developed into Manhattan. Six months after we opened, Uber came. ... When Uber filled this, filled that and then because the Strip District offered only one sort of food, we offered something very different. And because of the tech clientele that was here, it was very favorable to international food. ... The Strip District, pre-Corona, lunch time, it was one hour to come inside the door, every single day. We actually sort of operated as a cafeteria. Tech companies provide food, but they want to go out.

What's it going to be like expanding from here into the Hill District after expanding from Oakland to what you are now?

We have been looking for a location for expansion for about three years. We recognized that it was time to expand. The name is big. The need is big. Not only that, we've exhausted this building. This building is old and has a lot of needs. As the Strip District has developed, our property has appreciated greatly. We own a considerable portion of the land (around the store), and developers have approached us from everywhere.

We couldn't find the right fit. Monroeville wasn't the right time. The (Strip District) Terminal was close enough to keep our existing customer base. We went through long-term negotiations with them. At the end of the day, the price was very high. Next we were shown the opportunity in the Hill ... to rent an extremely subsidized lease. It just worked out perfectly in a food desert with no competition. With the space that we wanted with existing infrastructure put in place, ... it worked out the right way for us.

What did it feel like to be chosen for that?

One, it's extremely humbling. We perceive ourselves as very small. And my greatest fear is I'm inadequate or I'm not doing a good enough job for the customers or the community or the business. Or the business isn't as good as some of the bigger companies. We have strived and worked so hard ... to not necessarily shake the mom and pop image, but to be the most professional small market, to give the level of service that customers would receive from a corporate location.

We want to have the business model that we're caring for one customer at a time, one transaction at a time, one dollar at a time, but a good enough operating structure for what you would see in a corporate setting. It was humbling that they selected us and not somebody who was bigger. ... It was vindicating in a way. Most importantly, the immediate recognition that I made promises. I sat down and talked to people who lived in the community and sold myself and the business. Now that we have been selected, the weight hit me that you've got to show the people what you're talking about now.

Feeling the pressure?

Feeling the pressure but I'm up to the task. ... We have a duty now. There's a

difference. This is a public place that is owned by the public, and the public has selected you. So now there's a responsibility that's been set where I don't want to let anybody down.

What's your sense of the market opportunity for that store in the Hill, given that Shop 'n Save didn't seem like it was able to make it long term?

This is a golden opportunity. The most golden opportunity that can be had. First of all, as the Strip District of today is not the Strip District of 10 years ago, the Hill District today is not the Hill District of 10 years ago. And the Hill District of today is nothing as compared to the Hill District of 10 years from now. The Strip District is Manhattan. The Hill District is Brooklyn.

BIOBOX

Title: Owner, Salem's Market and Grill

Age: 40

Education: Graduate of Schenley High School, studied accounting and business management in college but opted to focus on the family business.

Residence: Hampton

Hobbies: "I've done nothing but eat, sleep and breath the business ever since I was a child."

Tim Schooley

Reporter

Pittsburgh Business Times

