

## The epic story of Schatz Crossroads restaurant

By **JOHN BECHTEL**  
Freelance Writer  
jbechtel  
@thenewvoltaire.com

The Schatz story is a tale of two cities and one family with vision and grit. It began here in Minot in the early 70's.

Danny Schatz was a young man who seemed to have it made. Handsome, charismatic, a regular at rodeo bulldogging competitions (that's when you jump from a horse onto a steer and wrestle it to the ground by twisting its horns, in case you've never tried it); he and his brother were nicknamed the "Marlboro men" by their admirers. As if that wasn't enough, Danny had a job to die for with the railroad as an electrician, with great pay and even better benefits. By all accounts, at the age of 25 Danny was set for life. But Danny was restless, unsatisfied. Something important was missing.

Some say an entrepreneur is a juvenile delinquent who never grows up. True or not, someone with Danny's drive without a suitable outlet will likely either get in trouble or build something big. That energy has to go somewhere, and the need for the security of a regular paycheck isn't enough for some folk. Danny's first entrepreneurial act was to quit his job at the railroad. His second, perhaps the more difficult of the two, was to tell his new wife Diane.

Diane had grown up on a local dairy farm, and by the age of 13 she was handling the family finances and paying the bills. They had horses at the farm, and their shared passion for horses was part of what drew the two of them together. Or maybe numbers people can't resist rodeo types, who's to say? Diane got promising employment at a local bank where she worked until Danny dropped his bombshell on her. Diane gamely quit her job and in 1975 they walked into Standard Truck Stop on the south side of Highway 2 & 52 and applied for jobs, Danny as the station manager and Diane as the restaurant and office manager. Was this a case of Diane's standing by her man or an entrepreneurial itch of her own? Or maybe both? If you know Danny and Diane, ask them sometime.

One of their first employees was Cora Rundberg, and you need to remember her name because she is still baking those wonderful pies today, 40 years later, at Schatz Crossroads Restaurant. To get a perspective on what her job has become, Cora and her helpers baked and sold 250 pies in just one day, this past Thanksgiving. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Cora says the first restaurant had maybe 20 tables, and her first job was as a prep cook, which in restaurant language is the person who prepares the daily specials. Because they were the daily specials, they were lower priced and had to be prepared in larger quantities.

Two years later, in 1977, with this experience under their belt, Danny and Diane leased the space on the north side of the highway (where Westlie's Truck Center is today) and became the owners of Schatz Crossroads Skelly's Truck Stop. Ten years and three kids later, they bought Minot Standard Truck Stop on the south side of the highway where their journey had begun, and eventually changed its name to Schatz Econostop. They now operated truck stops and restaurant operations on both sides of the highway.

Cora tells stories about how Krista, the youngest of the children, used to sit on the counter at 2 or 3 years old, peel cabbages to make coleslaw and take an occasional bite out of a raw onion. Their clientele has been so loyal, Krista says there were people sitting at the exact same tables in the restaurant on the day that she graduated from high school that they had occupied on the day she was born. Some of them even had their names painted on the backs of their chairs. Krista was imbibing entrepreneurship the same way kids learn language-by immersion in it, surrounded by exceptional role models-entrepreneurial parents. What university curriculum can match that for results?



Schatz Crossroads has one of the top bakeries in Minot.

Carolyn Ferguson/  
Special to MDN



**Krista Schatz Marshall** sits in her office at Schatz Crossroad Truck Stop. Krista left a promising career in Minneapolis to come home and run the truck stop and restaurant for her family.

Carolyn Ferguson/  
Special to MDN

### SOUR CREAM RAISIN PIE

For one pie

5 egg yolks  
1 cup of whipping cream  
1 cup sour cream  
1 cup of sugar  
1/6 cup corn starch  
1 cup of raisins  
1 teaspoon of cinnamon

Mix all ingredients (except raisins and cinnamon) in a double boiler and heat until thick. Remove from heat and stir in raisins and cinnamon. Pour into pie shells and let cool. Pie will set up once completely cooled. Add meringue topping to all pies then sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar. Bake for 20 minutes or until meringue is firm.

### Tale of two cities

As challenging as it might be to operate two truck stops across the highway from each other, it is quite another to open a third one 270 miles away. That is what Danny and Diane did in 1994. They made a huge investment in a Petro franchise truck stop operation in Fargo. To use a figure of speech, you might say they bet the farm. For the next six years, they continued their primary residence in Minot and managed Fargo long distance. What they had going for them was an extremely stable clientele (some folks ate in their restaurants three or four times a day), and a stable work force. Two of their cooks, Kent and Sue, have been with them for the last 35 years. And then there was Krista, who was growing up, eventually worked in the truck wash, before graduating to kitchen help and finally as a server (face-to-face exposure to the paying customer).

To continue our Charles Dickens metaphor, it was the best of times and the worst of times for the Schatz's. Rapid growth is ego gratifying and exciting, but it also is high risk. By 1998, Krista was 17, couldn't wait to get out of Minot, and moved about as far away as she could, to New York City, where she attended Pratt Institute for the fine arts. Most of the Schatz veteran employees stayed on in Minot, but the weight of responsibility usually carried by owners can exhaust those not accustomed or well adapted to it. This is a challenge faced by all growing businesses, and this is also why on a macro scale, many acquisition and mergers undertaken by huge conglomerates backfire disastrously after the fact.

Juggling competing business demands, in 2000 Danny and Diane reversed themselves and moved their primary residence to Fargo and operated Minot operations remotely, and in 2002 they combined their two Minot truck stops into one, which is the current Minot Schatz Crossroads Truck Stop. Meanwhile Krista had decided she liked the big city, and after Pratt, she moved to Minneapolis-St. Paul where she distinguished herself in high-end web technology and advertising

firms. Then came the 2011 flood and a phone call from mom. Krista, now married and with an 18-month old son and a high-powered career, was needed in Minot. Would she come home? Many of the employees couldn't get to work because their homes were under water. Schatz was committed to staying open 24/7. Minot was a disaster area, and confusion was endemic.

### Madison Avenue meets Minot

Krista came, along with husband Nicholas and their toddler son Oliver. When Krista asked her dad what her title was going to be, his answer was "You'll know in time." How different from corporate America. That was her first lesson in not getting hung up on titles. When she asked "How will I know what to do?" he responded "You'll figure it out." And she did. At first it was daunting, so much to do with resources spread so thin. The office area was indicative of the general state of affairs; there was an inch of dust over unused desks. Not that the business was about desk jockeys, but administrative tasks had to be performed efficiently for the restaurant to keep the customers happy. There was out-of-date software that was causing lines at check-out.

Under remote guidance from mom and dad, and with an innate capacity for taking one thing at a time, Krista focused on basics. First good, basic, home-style food. The menu hadn't changed in 30 years, and Krista saw no need to fix what wasn't broken. As she says, "It's who we are. Why try to be something we aren't?" Another basic was cleanliness. There is nothing worse than a dirty restaurant. Dirt can accumulate without management noticing. People notice spots, they don't notice accumulated dirt. Schatz was a 24/7 restaurant that literally never closed. How to keep it clean? A "Side-Work Bible" was produced with housekeeping lists for each area that had to be done before anyone went home.

There is risk involved in introducing new disciplines in work schedules, because some may resist or even quit, which can create brand new problems in a tight labor market. It takes courage and

resolve to do the right thing.

Today all the floors get cleaned in their entirety three times a day. Krista says considering the traffic they have to deal with on a 24/7 basis, there really is no excuse for a one or two shift restaurant to be dirty. And I have to agree. I won't eat in a dirty restaurant. I figure if the part I can see is not clean, what must the kitchen look like, where they prepare and store the food? I think it's amazing that a truck stop with traffic far exceeding most local restaurants manages to be one of the cleanest dining facilities in town.

Then there was the matter of updating the place. Krista renovated twice, and the old, tired look was replaced with modern surfaces and better lighting. The smoking room had to go, and they lost sales on the graveyard shift, but overall sales went up substantially. Most of those who had come in to smoke had gravitated to Schatz after the bars closed.

Krista must have inherited her family's competitive genes. She remembers when her mom and dad showed horses, they always went for best in class, and she's still doing that. I have been through the kitchens several times and they are modern, and the stainless gleams. The menu is basic but extensive, with lots and lots of what I call comfort food. One whole wall is emblazoned with giant letters, Steak and Eggs. They sell about 75 of those every morning. And you don't have to sit in that dining room to order it.

This is not fine dining. This is casual country dining at its best. There must be some very good reasons why they serve a minimum of 1,000 meals a day here, every day. I came in Christmas Day and it was full. Some come just for the cakes and pies, homemade doughnuts, and of course, for the sour cream and raisin pie, which is Krista's grandmother's recipe, and is in a category all by itself. (Yes, they agreed to give up the recipe for you.) To the best of my knowledge, Schatz is the only major dessert bakery in town.

Prices? I haven't seen a lot of luxury cars in the parking lot, so it seems a lot of ordinary people find the pricing acceptable or they wouldn't be there so often. Or maybe they are extraordinary people who judge value by more than

a price tag. It seems to me that is the North Dakota way.

Haven't eaten there yet? Go for breakfast (which is anytime) and order the Spanish Omelette. Take someone with you; it's big enough for two people. Seriously. It's got hash browns, onions, green peppers, American cheese and three eggs. They pour a Spanish sauce over the open omelette and then fold it over. I prefer mine on toasted sourdough bread. It is served with sour cream and salsa.

Maybe it's just me, but there's one more thing I have noticed about Schatz's restaurant. I don't see that many people on their smart phones. Maybe they don't need their social media as much because they are having such a good time talking to real people. People are talking everywhere. The next time you go there, take a moment and just listen to the hum of it.

As for Krista, she may not know it yet, but I believe she is going to be a pace setter for those of her generation who are part of the greatest generational transfer of wealth and responsibility in the history of North Dakota and of this country. The earlier generations that created and preserved wealth, farms, and profitable businesses are holding their breath to see if something of their business acumen and values rubbed off on their presumptive heirs.

Krista, like so many others, has benefitted greatly by leaving the area and gaining valuable experience and global perspectives, and the family business stands to benefit from this "Madison Avenue" exposure. On the other hand, Krista and Nic both marvel at how much there is to know and learn; the nitty-gritty details of every business that make or break you. High-flying business jargon and buzzwords won't get you through that. Krista gets it right when she says technology has to serve the business, not vice versa. You resist the temptation to overbuy, becoming beta testers for new toys. That is what smooth generational transfers are all about, combining the best of the old and the new. Each generation has to appreciate what the other brings to the table. As Krista says, "I can't imagine not doing everything in my power to preserve and build upon what my parents have spent their lives creating."