

# UP FRONT

## HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer Lynne Baron

### DeAngelis Donuts 202 Rhode Island Avenue Rochester, Pa.

One of the most eye-catching roadside sites for motorists traveling northwest from Pittsburgh toward Beaver Falls along Ohio River Boulevard is a massive spinning donut at 202 Rhode Island Avenue in Rochester. This 30-foot-high manmade marker is a whimsical sign that announces one of the region's most delicious delicacies—the donuts of DeAngelis—where thousands of homemade treats have been baked and sold every day since 1975.

The story of those “delightfully different” donuts goes back to 1947. With assistance from the G.I. Bill, Italian immigrant Joseph Louis DeAngelis opened the first location of the successful family business on College Hill in Beaver Falls; that store is now owned by Geneva College.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's son Richard, who owns and operates two DeAngelis Donuts locations in nearby Rochester and Chippewa, says his father possessed an innate marketing savvy when it came to running the mom-and-pop business. Richard, 54, explains:

The slogan and logo on the sign came from my father. For being an immigrant with a limited education and limited resources, he was very creative. In a lot of ways, he was ahead of his time with product marketing and advertising. My father created the renderings himself, and had the idea for the rotating donut and the flashing arrow.

Richard says his father also invented the shop's popular “light and airy” French donut: “He made it from scratch from a puff pastry. Nobody cooks French pastry batter on a stove and turns it into a donut. All of the donut recipes are his own.”<sup>2</sup>

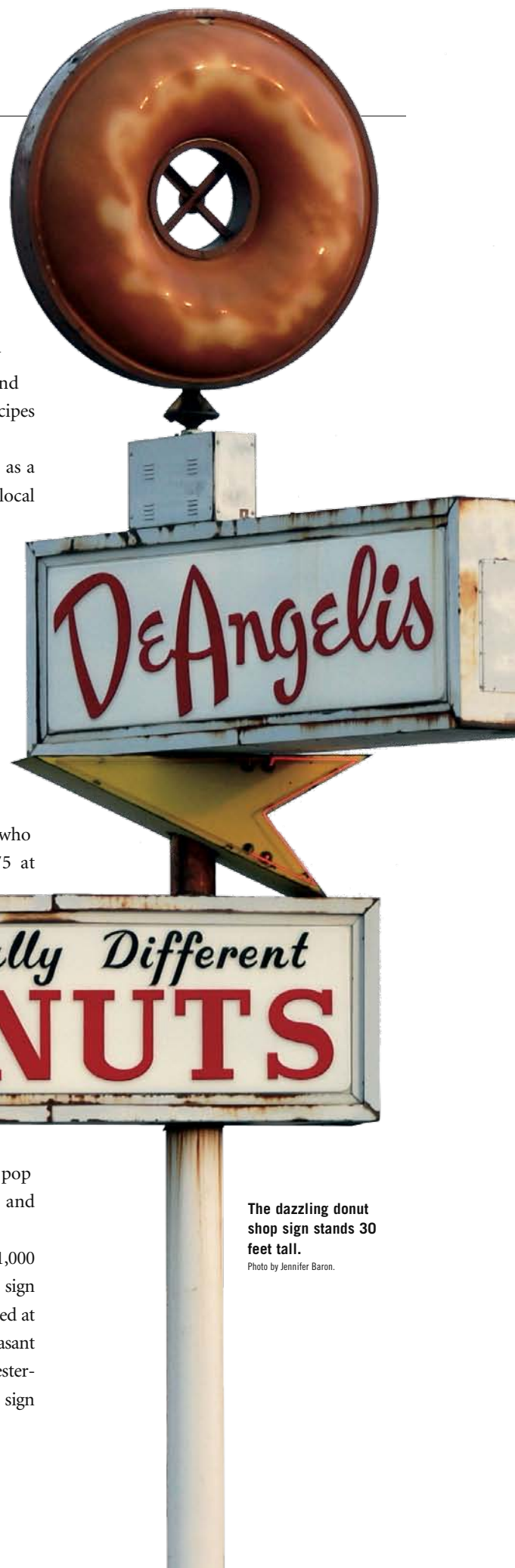
The shop's towering sign has served as a valuable focal point for more than just local patrons and students interested in the sweet treats sold within. “When I was younger, people who had small airplanes used the sign as a reference point because it lit up like a beacon and was so tall.”<sup>3</sup>

The unmistakable College Hill sign became the model for the roadside version installed at the Rochester location of DeAngelis Donuts run by Richard and his family today. Literally raised in the family business, Richard—who opened the Rochester location in 1975 at



age 19 with his brother—recalls sorting pop bottles at age six, and cleaning coolers and painting basement steps as a teen.<sup>4</sup>

Richard spends between \$600 and \$1,000 per year to maintain the distinctive shiny sign that is visible to travelers miles away. Located at the corner of Rhode Island Avenue and Pleasant Street, and visible from the nearby Rochester-Monaca Bridge, the 30-foot-tall fiberglass sign



The dazzling donut shop sign stands 30 feet tall.

Photo by Jennifer Baron.

boasts a seven-foot-round spinning glazed donut, a yellow four-and-a-half-foot-long arrow outlined in red neon, embossed Lexan panels, and a mix of bright red cursive and uppercase typeface. Designed according to Joseph DeAngelis' original renderings, the sign was manufactured by the Youngstown, Ohio-based Joe Jenkin Co. in 1975.<sup>5</sup>

Installed at the edge of the shop's parking lot where a Boron Station once stood, the retro-style sign is a fixture at a bustling, high-visibility corner. "In the late 1970s, a truck driver from Philadelphia took a short cut through our parking lot and destroyed the bottom of the sign, which we had to rebuild," recalls Richard. During the early 1980s, the sign was moved closer to the shop to accommodate the rebuilding of the heavily trafficked intersection.<sup>6</sup>

The rotating sign's gears and motor are housed in a steel box located under the donut structure. During extremely windy weather, a handy slip clutch allows the spinning

component to "free-wheel," thus preventing the motor from burning.


Richard underscores the support and shared memories of the people of Beaver—a mix of natives, longtime residents, transplants, and those returning to town for visits and holidays—who have expressed feelings of nostalgia and warmth for the recognizable landmark.

"We get a lot of compliments on the sign. People make references to it, and say 'Every time we come over the bridge, our little ones see the sign and want to stop.' You can see the sign from far away at the foot of the bridge. It shows itself off and draws attention."<sup>7</sup>

The shop sells more than 2,000 donuts per day as well as bagels, muffins, cookies, coffee, and frozen drinks. "We used to sell more than twice that 20 years ago," adds Richard, describing a time when DeAngelis was jammed with workers on their way to the now-closed B&W Tubular Mill, where more than 5,000 people worked. Nearly everyone,

including Beaver Falls native Joe Namath and former Steelers star Franco Harris, are fans of the doughy delights, which come in 30 varieties. Even actor Orlando Bloom is rumored to have been in the shop while in the area for a film shoot.<sup>8</sup>

No longer just a local landmark, the DeAngelis Donuts sign has been appropriated by a German company for its logo, and featured on the website of a New York City-based architect.<sup>9</sup>

Richard, who often serves patrons from up and down the East Coast, sees his unique sign as part of a larger context of regional attractions and pride. "There are a lot of quirky things about Beaver County. In today's transient world, people love to come back to Beaver because of the friendliness and the beauty of the area." With a brand new coat of paint, the much-loved DeAngelis Donuts sign is ready to enter the new decade looking to both the past and the future.<sup>10</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Richard DeAngelis. Interview with author, November 24, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Richard DeAngelis and Stephany DeAngelis. Interviews with author, November 24, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Richard DeAngelis. Interview with author, November 24, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Richard DeAngelis and Stephany DeAngelis. Interviews with author, November 24, 2010.

#### **A baker at DeAngelis Donuts, 1970s.**

*Photo courtesy Richard DeAngelis.*

