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Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership

Business Brief Blog

What is local?

What does it mean when you say something is local? Who decides whether it is or isn't? I've pondered these two questions for many months - turning them over in my head many times.

Consult the dictionary and you'll find several definitions - some referring to geography, others a sense of belonging or custom.

In news articles, advertising and conversations the qualifier "local" has gotten a lot of use lately.

I now read business articles talking about "hyper-local" trends. I see social media posts and hashtags that highlight the term. I recently counted radio advertisements over a two-hour drive: over half of the ads used the word local in some way.

Today the word is no longer just an adjective or a noun. It's taken on a new significance.

Often, I think local is used as a substitute for the terms community focused or owner-operated. Local can be a useful distinguishing characteristic especially if you are looking for something in close proximity.

However, it can also hold a power to diminish by denouncing something as less than or un-authentic. At a time when Erie appears to be prioritizing coming together as one community the possibility of being sub divided into further segments gives me pause.

I've come to the conclusion that I spent so much time trying to decipher the definition of local because it is personal for me in several ways.

In October of 2016 I opened my Donatos Pizza franchise in the new Greengarden Place plaza. Yes, it is a franchise. I did not create any of the recipes or systems but I have tried to make it a part of our community. There is a Donatos Pizza exhibit at the expERIENCE children's museum that I paid for. I have developed an ongoing relationship with the Museum and other organizations like the Barber Center, Autism Society and Girl Scouts.

Donatos is headquartered in Columbus, OH, where it was founded in 1963. It is a family owned company with 55 corporate restaurants and 105 franchises, of which my store is one.

I currently have 17 employees. Many of them are part time students in high school or college but I have three full time managers. Two of the managers bought new cars last year and one, who was renting, also purchased a home - events that would not have happened without their employment at Donatos. I read all the time about the need to create family sustaining jobs. I've created three. It may not be many but it is a start.

But my concern about the local connotation is not simply related to my restaurant. I am not from Erie, which means I am NOT local, at least according to some.

My family moved here in the summer of 2013 because my husband accepted a position with Erie Insurance, where he is still employed today. We have three children in the Fairview School District. Our oldest child started at Fairview in First grade. For the younger two, it's the only school they've ever known. Even if I'm never considered local my children will be.

We, like so many others from other states or other countries, have chosen to make Erie our home. We want it to thrive even though we haven't been here for decades.

Let's not allow a word like local to create further divisions. We all have a vested interest in our future here and a role in making Erie a gem city.