



# LITTLE O'S FROZEN TREATS

## SWEETNESS AND SMILES ON WHEELS

For 33 years Valerie Cranden scooped and smiled for customers who lined up around the building and into the parking lot of Ollie's Frozen Custard. Over the two decades she owned the iconic custard stand, it was a second home that, for all it gave, demanded much in return.

"As a business owner, there were a lot of family times I missed out on," Valerie explains. "Even when I wasn't there, the business needed my time. I wanted more flexibility in my schedule."

When general manager Eric Karl suggested in 2020 that she add a mobile component and take her custard business on the road, the idea pointed to more than a new revenue stream. It pointed to a venture that would bring the same frozen joy to customers while allowing Valerie more freedom as the owner.

In 2022, they launched Little O's Frozen Treats, a mobile food trailer

serving popular custard delights. In 2023, Valerie sold the custard stand to new owners and went all-in on the mobile business full time. "I talked to my kids first to make sure they were okay with it, because Ollie's was all they'd ever known," Valerie recalls.

She had begun working at Ollie's in 1990, and bought the business in 2000, before her children Kayla, 21, and Kyle, 16, were born. Their opinion meant a lot to her.

The Little O's trailer, joined this season by a food truck, offers Valerie and



Valerie Cranden and Eric Karl





Custard galore

Eric more control over their schedule. Every event Little O's works is attended by one of them, but, unlike a brick-and-mortar store, there's no need to be open seven days a week, nine months out of the year. In 2023, Valerie took a week off to go on her first summer vacation in more than two decades—a trip to New York to watch a Cubs versus Yankees series with her son.

The process of putting the custard business on wheels took several years. First, there was research into the various options for mobile food businesses. They decided to start with a trailer because it's bigger and can handle larger events. After finding a vendor to build the trailer, Eric spent months designing the inside.

It takes meticulous planning to maximize every inch of available space inside a food trailer. Eric measured the equipment it would need and laid out various configurations in a computer-aided design program.

Besides counter space to prepare food and serve customers, they needed shelving to keep ingredients at hand and space to store extra inventory that might be needed at a longer event. The Little O's trailer also includes two double-door refrigerators, two countertop freezers, three soft-serve frozen custard machines, a soda cooler, and two frozen drink machines. When designing the new food truck, space was even tighter.

And both vehicles also need a generator to provide power.

The difference in capacity means each vehicle has a separate menu. Because the truck has just one frozen drink machine, it doesn't serve slushies, but instead serves the more popular frozen lemonade. This year, the trailer



will also replace one of the custard machines with a milkshake machine so it can serve shakes. "What's nice about the truck and trailer is that we have the flexibility to try different things with the menu," Eric says. "We've introduced dipped cones and custard-cookie sandwiches. We can test something new out at an event, and if it bombs, we just don't serve it anymore. At the next event, people don't even know that you ever offered it on the menu."

Since many events begin before noon, Valerie and Eric are experimenting with adding mini-donuts and bagels to the menu this year. In the morning, most people aren't yet ready for a creamy frozen treat.

The addition of the truck also means they can broaden their reach this year. For example, last year while the trailer was parked at a Kirkland festival over the entire Fourth of July weekend, the truck visited events in both Batavia and Coal City.

Little O's has traveled to events in southern Wisconsin and eastern Iowa, as well as all over northern Illinois. Its range is complicated somewhat by a patchwork of health department regulations. In Illinois, there is no statewide health certificate for food vendors; Little O's has to apply and pay for a certificate in each county where it wants to sell. Some municipalities have additional fees or restrictions. And of course, each event comes with its own vendor fees and paperwork.

Paperwork for the business's regular operation takes up about one day a week, plus several hours each night. Another full day each week is spent deep cleaning the inside of the truck and trailer. "It's not a 9 to 5 job," Eric emphasizes. "We're still putting in the long days. People see us show up at an event, and half an hour later we're ready

to start serving. Nobody sees all the prep work that happens behind the scenes."

**At some banks, you feel like a nuisance, but never at Resource. Everybody's friendly, they know you, and everybody's ready to help.**

*Valerie Cranden, Owner,  
Little O's Frozen Treats*

Once Valerie, Eric, and their small staff arrive at an event, the hard work becomes worth it as they begin delivering swirls and smiles to waiting patrons. The trailer and truck were designed to keep lines moving. In most cases, a customer's order is ready by the time they've finished paying thanks to Eric's forethought of the interior designs.

While the backdrop has changed, the lines still form. Valerie and Eric are still at the window brightening customers' days with decadent treats, all while enjoying the sweetness of the business they've designed.



**YourResource**  
FOR LIVING

555 BETHANY ROAD | DEKALB, IL 60115

© 2024 RESOURCE BANK, N.A.

Events around  
the county