



Alcenia's owner, Betty Joyce "B.J." Chester-Tamayo begins her patrons' culinary experience with a hug.

IN THE NAME OF LOVE Story & Photos by Tiffany Amore

The first thing you get when you arrive at Alcenia's is a hug from the owner herself. Betty Joyce "B.J." Chester-Tamayo believes that she has the world's greatest customers. "I thank you for coming," she tells each one, "because there are so many places that you can go, and when you come to me, I really appreciate that." But if it weren't for a tragic event in B.J.'s life, there would be no Alcenia's to go to at all.

In B.J.'s family, her 85-year-old mother — whom the restaurant is named after — is known as the cook. "My mom has been cooking since she was about 9," says B.J. "We always had homemade biscuits and fresh peach preserves, but she never thought of opening a restaurant."

B.J., however, knew early on she wanted to manufacture her mother's recipes for preserves. "Among our race, so many times a lot of our heritage dies with our ancestors," she notes. "Great cooks, great people, but we never get the recipes. And I didn't want that to happen. I wanted a legacy to go on with my mom."

With a degree in business from LeMoyne-Owen College, B.J. was working for FedEx until one fateful day in 1996 that urged her onto the entrepreneurial path.

"I lost my only son in a motorcycle accident," B.J. recalls. "That's when I knew I could no longer work for somebody else or keep putting off what I had to do. Emotionally, I could not go back to work. I slept all the time. I didn't sleep on the bed, I slept on a mattress on the floor."

"When I lost my son, it was like there was a hole in my heart and nobody knew how far it went," she continues. "And you never get to the bottom. Every time you think you're at the bottom, the hole drops even further."

B.J. knew something had to give so that she could move on from the tragedy and continue a tradition for her family — especially for her granddaughter Alcenia, who was born after her father's — B.J.'s son's — death. "If I'm here at the restaurant, I stay so busy," says B.J. "I don't have any time to think."

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