

### **Kathleen Salvo: Sinfully Good Chocolate for a Heavenly Cause**

When she majored in special education, Kathleen Salvo thought she was going with the flow, expecting to teach for a while, marry, have children and a good career to fall back on. She had no inkling that her second child would be born with a rare disease and that launching Heavenly Chocolates—a gourmet confection company—on the foundation of her family’s defunct candy-making business, would be their partial salvation.

“When I Look back I see how certain events in my life were preparing me for where I am today,” says Salvo, 50. It may seem coincidental how receiving a box of Keller’s Crunch led Salvo to its founder, who became her mentor. “Endless instances suggest that I was in the right place at the right time, but I sense something greater than me orchestrating things. Some days it feels like I’m just along for the ride. I call it divine intervention.”

Divinity may have first entered her life in the summer of 1969. After a morning of making candy in the family chocolate business, Kathleen Van Clief took a quick dip in the ocean off the Jersey Shore and Met Sal Salvo, who would become her husband. The chocolate shop became an integral part of their three year courtship (culminating in a large Italian wedding on a freezing January day) and first five years of marriage. “We spent holidays creating



#### **Move over Willy Wonka: Meet Kathleen Salvo**

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Valentine hearts and Easter bunnies,” she laughed.

She spent much of the rest of the time studying and working. The fifth of eight children of a Hoboken New Jersey cabinet-maker and domestic helper, Salvo was the first one to graduate high school and head to college.

For two years, Salvo attended Fairleigh Dickinson University in the evenings while working in Lever Bros’ biology lab during the day. Then she transferred to Jersey City State University and earned a degree in special education in 1974. She worked as a graduate assistant at Montclair State University while earning an MA in Learning Disabilities and certification as a Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant in 1977.

Then Salvo began teaching in Adult Opportunities Center, a private school and sheltered workshop for handicapped adolescents and adults in Hackensack. Afterwards, she set up a private practice testing learning disabled children, writing prescriptions to remedy their difficulties, and coaching teachers on how to best work with these students.

#### **“Amanda has taught me how to work through a problem and not around it.”**

In 1977, the shop closed when Salvo’s grandparents moved to Florida-taking the carefully-guarded candy recipes with them. Life was good, when a bouncy, bubbly, healthy baby girl, Amanda, joined the family in Warren, N.J. which by then also had a 4-year old son.

But soon after Amanda celebrated her first birthday the child who took corners on two wheels while giggling and talking up a storm began to have trouble picking up small objects, walking, and keeping her balance. By 15-months old she could no longer move on her own, or speak. She could not even make eye contact. Her doctors were mystified until after a five-day evaluation in October 1986, a renowned neurologist confirmed she had Rett Syndrome. The Salvos were devastated. The rare disease attacks perfectly normal little girls between 12 and 18 months old. Fine motor, gross motor, and speech skills disappear. Seizures occur. Curvature of the spine sets in. The prognosis is unknown and cognitive ability varies greatly. The Salvos, who along the way had three more children, customized a rigorous stimulation program for Amanda involving 100 volunteers a week working with her for seven

## **Kathleen Salvo** *Continued*

hour days. After three months, Amanda could creep around on her own and 16 months later she walked independently.

To show appreciation to the volunteers, each year as holiday gifts the Salvos made candy using the family recipes. Amanda sparked to the process and made it known that she wanted to be around during every part of the candy-making. Meanwhile, the Salvos were growing increasingly concerned about Amanda's future. They investigated many programs around the country seeking an appropriate setting for her after she turned 21 in May, 2002 and her childhood placement expired- but nothing came close to meeting her needs of maintaining her precious but limited skill level. (Amanda can still walk and is very aware of and responsive to others. She communicates with eye gazes and a computer.) And most of the programs had at least a five-year waiting list.

At last they were inspired to create a group home/sheltered workshop to benefit Amanda and others like her. Salvo founded the Heavenly Chocolates Inc., foundation in 1998, to allow tax –deductible contributions to fund the group home and employ community-minded seniors and teens.

At first, business was mainly Christmas seasonal. But as its reputation spread, so has year-round demand. Salvo starts her day in the customer service department with phone calls and emails to answer and return plus orders to fax to her Pennsylvania production plant where a dozen workers ship them out. (In New Jersey there are just three employees).

Marketing consumes a huge part of her day, preparing ads, trying to get the Heavenly Chocolate story out, and negotiating with national outlets like Harry and David, King's, Marriott, and Starbucks to carry their products.

Running a candy company is sales and opposed to service “and very different from what I'd done before,” she says. But there are surprising pleasures: such as meeting extremely creative marketing people who are open-minded risk-takers, traits she values highly. What she resents is the increase in time away from her family and from things other than business.

“I thought I was busy before I even started this business but now realize I didn't know the real meaning of “busy” back then. Add five children (25, 21, 16, 13, and 11) with five individual schedule, a husband with a busy career of his own, (financial planning), an aging mother, volunteering in the community on a regular basis (Girl Scouts) plus the business, “now that's busy,” she says. “I consider it a great accomplishment that no one is complaining more than usual and I'm still relatively sane!”

But her greatest accomplishment, she thinks, is having given Amanda the best education possible. “I want to continue to support her and help others with similar needs. That's why I want to manufacture the finest chocolate confections and attract major national outlets for our products.”

Next year, revenues will be used to start a family retreat center for handicapped individuals. Even with a companion/caretaker and extensive support system, Amanda's day-to-day care is sporadic, at best, she says.

Heavenly Chocolates can be the means for creating the stability and security needed.

Still, the market is tough and Salvo is used to getting shot down. “Working the numbers I tell myself that every negative response gets me that much closer to the next yes,” she says. “Sooner or later we can't help but succeed. But now that Amanda has turned 21 reality has hit. “What will happen when I can no longer take care of her or oversee her care?” she asks. “It's not fair to burden other family members. Heavenly Chocolates must be successful.”

Salvo regrets not having started her company sooner when a buoyant economy could have made launching much easier. “But I feel it's best not to dwell on what ifs, to move forward and deal with whatever comes,” she says. “I have learned that the present time, this moment, is definitely a gift, and that I am not in control. Amanda has taught me how to live, to enjoy life and to make things positive, and how to work through a problem and not around it..”

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### **What Can You Do?**

- Contact Heavenly Chocolates by calling 888.260.4133 or on the world wide web at [www.chocolatefromheaven.com](http://www.chocolatefromheaven.com)
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