

No Shrinking Violet Here

Business Graduate Markets his Design Talent to Celebrity Clients... BY AIMEE LEWIS ELLIOTTE ('92)



◀ **MICHAEL WALLS ('90)** is the owner of **Michael Walls Florals & Events** in Beverly Hills. He won the “Oscar of flowers” earlier this year for a celebrity wedding in Los Angeles.

even skip school to help out during the big holidays.

Walls returned to Little Rock after college and worked briefly in interior design before heading out to Los Angeles. Once there, he began free-lancing for different event companies. Eventually hired by one as the lead event design and studio manager, Walls made a name for himself in the industry.

He struck out on his own in 2000 and “I had to prove myself all over again. I took every job that came along because it gave me exposure. One job became three, and three became nine.”

Walls credits his popularity to his personal service, overseeing each event himself. This level of dedication has paid off; he now has a high-profile list of clients who seek him out a year in advance of their events.

Since he recently won *Special Events Magazine’s* Best Floral Design Award for the 2005 wedding of then-L.A. Lakers basketball star Derek Fisher to Candace Patton, he is in even higher demand. The award is considered “the Oscar of flowers.”

With only six weeks to plan the Fisher-Patton wedding, Walls says it is one of the best projects he has worked on. The award-winning design was an extravaganza that included thousands of red and pink roses, pink hydrangeas, and burgundy amaranthus. He hung the dinner tent’s 12 wrought-iron chandeliers with garlands of roses and smilax, tied back the tent’s velvet draperies with rose clusters, and planted the moss-covered sign-in table with rose heads.

But he says every project is fun.

“I have a theory that if you don’t enjoy what you’re doing, you need a new job,” he said. “I wake up every day excited.”

Amid all his success, Walls has remained friendly and humble—which is often attributed to his southern roots.

“I’m very proud to be from the South,” he said. “Before I had a publicist, I was asked to submit a bio for a job. I had a friend read it first, and she suggested I take out the part about being from Arkansas. I didn’t. I think it’s my duty and obligation to be a positive representative of the South.” ■

You cannot govern the creative impulse; all you can do is eliminate obstacles and smooth the way for it.

—artist Kimon Nicolaidis

THESE WORDS APTLY describe CBU alumnus Michael Walls (Marketing, '90), owner of Michael Walls Florals & Events in Beverly Hills, California.

Walls knew at an early age that he had creative talent and that he wanted to run his own business one day. Smart enough to know that to be successful he would have to understand the foundations of business ownership, Walls came to CBU because of its reputation as good business school.

“You can’t teach talent, creativity. Those things can’t be bought,” he said. “So I decided to get a business degree so I could market it. And a business owner needs a sense of well-roundedness”

Growing up in Little Rock, Arkansas, Walls learned the mechanics of floral arrangements from his aunt who managed a shop in a florist chain. He started going to work with her when he was 13 and would

Accounting for Taste

Alumnus John Bragg brings a lot of business savvy to the table... BY CAROLYNE PARK

DURING HIS SIX years as an accountant, John Bragg ('00) worked with several small business owners standing on the shaky edge of starting their own ventures. Watching them pursue their dreams made him want to leave the comfort zone of the corporate world for a little risk of his own.

"After a while, I started to identify with my clients more than my colleagues," Bragg said. "I wanted to take my own ride."

Two years later, Bragg is one of the city's most celebrated young chefs.

He opened his restaurant, River Oaks by John Bragg, at 5871 Poplar in March. The restaurant features a contemporary atmosphere, a menu with everything from grouper and lobster, to steaks, veal and quail, and a selection of some 145 wines, with more than 50 available by the glass. It's a concept that is drawing crowds.

"We were there last Saturday, and it was packed," said David Dunavant, vice president at investment banking firm Stephens, Inc. Dunavant has enjoyed Bragg's culinary expertise since he reopened La Montagne in 2004, bringing his own flavor to the 25-year-old French bistro.

Dunavant said River Oaks is shades different than La Montagne, with a more contemporary style for its East Memphis clientele, but many of the same delectable dishes.

"He's raised the level of the presentation and the atmosphere," he said. "The wine list is phenomenal."

Bragg, 33, was first exposed to cooking growing up on the family farm in Arlington. He began cooking professionally after graduating from Christian Brothers High School in 1991, training under renowned local chef Erling Jensen at La Tourelle French restaurant in midtown Memphis.

"He was eager to learn and a hard worker," said Jensen, who now owns Erling Jensen The Restaurant at 1044 South Yates, just around the corner from River Oaks.

Bragg went on to be sous chef at Maxwell's, and worked under Gene Bjorklund at Aubergine. In 1994, he attended culinary school at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, worked at Chez Dominique in St. Jean de Luz, France, and then for SilverSea Cruise Line, where he gained experience in South American, Italian, and Asian cuisine.

Back in Memphis, Bragg worked under Jensen



"The process of putting out nice food in a restaurant, it's a real mental game, like sports."

again as pastry chef at Erling Jensen, was pastry chef at City Bread Co., and chef de cuisine at Bonne Terre.

"After I'd been cooking for five years, I decided to do something different," Bragg said. "I wanted to see

continued on page 15 ▶▶

Balancing a Potent Mix

Biochemical Engineering Graduate Juggles Family and Tough Track... BY RUMA BANERJI KUMAR

Michelle Perry ('06) at home in Tipton County with four of her five children: Anna Barnett, 17; Katherine Perry, 8; Christian Perry, 5; and Josh Barnett, 18.



MICHELLE PERRY LOADED her 5- and 8-year-olds into her eggplant-colored van, one dozen Spider-Man cupcakes precariously balancing in her arms. A soft rain fell like mist and a temperamental sun refused to shine on this morning, though it was past 7.

It was another hectic day for Perry ('06). On this Wednesday, she had two biochemical engineering projects and papers to finish, a test to study for and her 5-year-old's birthday party to plan. Her son Christian wanted a Batman cake and a special dinner of hot dogs and chips.

Thank goodness for the simple tastes of a 5-year-old boy. Not much else has been simple for this undergraduate student and wife and mother of five.

Five years ago, Perry decided to sign herself up for the toughest program Christian Brothers University offers: chemical engineering. Within that program, she chose the toughest track: biochemical engineering -- which required her not only to successfully run a gauntlet of advanced calculus and science classes, but also to pass an extra set of biology classes on top of it. Half of those who started chemical engineering with her have dropped out.

It has taken her an extra year, but Perry graduated in May as the first woman to complete the biochemical

engineering program at CBU. She is 41.

"I never thought this day would come," Perry said with a girlish, nervous laugh that bubbles out in spurts. "Having my children is a big thing, but this is probably the biggest milestone in my life after them."

Perry is among more than 6 million older students who have returned to colleges and universities across the nation. Over the next decade, that number is expected to surpass 8 million, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Perry's return to college came in fits and starts over 20 years. She dropped out of the University of Memphis in 1983 when she became pregnant with her first son Michael. In later years, she tried nursing school and community college.

Finally, after years as a human resources and marketing director for Sam's Club, making decent money, calling the shots, she enrolled at CBU.

"I went from telling people what to do to people telling me what to do. That was tough," she said.

There were days she wasn't sure she could make it. In her junior year, she took four challenging courses including thermodynamics, a physics course with a reputation for weeding out the strong from the weak.

Michael Hibler, a classmate and 23-year-old former

valedictorian from Whitehaven High School whose responsibilities outside school are largely his two cats, said he tried not to complain too much around her.

"I felt bad going on about my life when she had so much going on in hers," he said.

On some nights, class demands along with responsibilities at her part-time job and home brought Perry to tears.

Each time though, her husband Wade reminded her that a college degree was a dream deferred by nearly two decades. She also drew inspiration from her mother, who went back to school in her late 30s and graduated at 41.

"I kept telling myself if she did it, I can do it," Perry said.

And she did.

Now Perry is planning for a lucrative job in pharmaceuticals or possibly in the ethanol industry, where chemical engineers are developing cutting-edge work to produce a cleaner gas for automobiles. Her degree will lead to a salary more than twice what she made before college.

She has a teenager preparing to graduate from high school this summer and another the next year. They are struggling with the thought of college. They are wor-



Perry at work on her senior project in biochemical engineering.

ried about the rigor of classes, of making it through.

When they tell her that, she said, "You live only one life, you take advantage of everything you can." ■

Copyright, The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, TN. Used with permission. (www.commercialappeal.com)

◀ ◀ **BRAGG** *continued from page 13*

what else was out there."

That's when Bragg left the kitchen to pursue a B.S. in accounting from Christian Brothers University. He graduated and worked as an accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers and Thompson Dunavant PLC. Bragg said he returned to his career as a chef for the thrill and satisfaction he gets from a job well done.

"The process of putting out nice food in a restaurant, it's a real mental game, like sports," he said. "You have to be intuitive, you have to make decisions really fast and you have to put it out there. Nobody said after I did an audit, 'Thank you so much, that was really great.'"

For Bragg, it's not just about preparing good food, but also creating ambiance, providing good service, and giving customers a pleasurable experience.

"I like making people happy," Bragg said.

Dunavant said Bragg is known for getting out of the kitchen and visiting with guests. "It's one of the charming things about him. He's very personable. He's been known to share a glass of cognac at the end of the night and unwind."

In opening River Oaks, Bragg drew his business savvy from his experience in the corporate world. He

knows his customers because he's lived on their side of the fence. Bragg selected the spot next to Park Place Hotel for its convenient, centralized location. For the restaurant, he brought in designer Nancy Mah, daughter of the late Memphis architect Francis Mah, to create the modern, casual, and elegant style of River Oaks. The former Cockeyed Camel location underwent a major remodel with a new roof, arched windows, warm-colored walls, slate tile floors, and copper and glass lighting fixtures to create a sense of intimacy.

River Oaks began serving dinner on February 20, and lunch March 2. Bragg said there is never a second chance to make a first impression, and he enjoys the challenge and pressure of getting it right the first time. It's a confidence he's earned after years of training.

"You make a lot of mistakes, you burn your fingers a lot before you learn to do it well," he said.

Jensen is proud of his former protege. He dined at River Oaks in March, and said he was impressed.

"It makes me feel good. He's doing great," Jensen said. "I told him to just keep on doing what you're doing, and you'll do great. It'll be no problem." ■

This article is reprinted with kind permission from the Memphis Business Journal. Further reproduction is prohibited.