

MAIN LINE TODAY

FRONTLINE: Profile
By Dawn E. Warden



Photograph by Jared Castaldi

Expanding Man

Kildare's kingpin Dave Magrogan blows up—and takes some hits along the way.

It's probably not an accident that Dave Magrogan's latest venture involves oysters. After all, at age 34, with seven restaurants under his brand (and three more in the works), a lovely new bride, two adoring daughters, a son on the way and a loyal group of employees, the world is indeed his oyster.

The first time we meet is at Doc Magrogans, the first installment in his oyster-house series. It's beautiful inside, loaded with Old World touches—a tin ceiling, wainscoting, a long mahogany bar with ornate brass fixtures and a steep staircase leading to a more intimate second bar. After chatting up general manager Tom Mitchell, I'm left alone to peruse the endless photographs of Magrogan and his family, friends and fans in various states of jollity.

Then Magrogan appears at the top of the stairs. He's compact and attractive, and today he's working a clean-cut/disheveled look in a button-down fitted dress shirt, stylish dark blue jeans and expensive European-style shoes. As he makes his way down the stairs, one hand pushes through his hair and the other is wedged in his pocket. Elana Grande, director of events for Magrogan's Irish pub chain Kildare's and COO of the DMG Group, is a couple steps behind him lugging a jam-packed briefcase. Grande is Magrogan's No. 4 girl—new wife Shannon is No. 1; his daughters, 2 and 3.

After a brief meet-and-greet, I join Magrogan upstairs, where a meeting/chef-tasting is in progress. Doc's opened in mid-October; now Magrogan wants to know what's selling and what's not, what (and who) needs fixing, and how things can be done more efficiently. He sits back as each department head takes a turn addressing an issue, never once steering the conversation or interjecting his own opinion. Almost all of the nine people in the room have worked for him at least four years, a fact he attributes to putting them in positions that suit their capabilities and drive and letting them do their jobs. "There's knowledge you can have and knowledge you can buy," Magrogan says. "I don't need a degree in this or that; I can afford to pay someone to do those things for me. It's all about controlling your ego—otherwise you miss an opportunity to make your company smarter. I hire people who have skills that I don't have."

In Magrogan's second-story office at the West Chester Kildare's, there's a rack on the wall filled with inspirational verbiage pertinent to both business and life. It's no coincidence that among his closest friends is former Sixers honcho and motivational guru Pat Croce. "I have a few books he doesn't," jokes Magrogan in reference to their common appreciation of self-help literature. Among the must-reads for all his employees are a list of "Core Values" and the "Twelve Laws of Success."

"You become what you think about," says Magrogan. "I came from a lower middle-class background. Some people become tainted by this and feel stuck—held back. But if you model yourself after successful people, see what they did that worked and didn't—if you work hard, develop your staff, reinvest in the business and put forth positive energy—you'll attain success."

A child of divorce, Magrogan grew up far from the Main Line in Brookhaven with his mom and two older sisters. "There's no history of money; we're just a hard-working Irish family."

Magrogan started working in restaurants when he was a teenager and continued through college at West Chester University and, later, chiropractic school, unaware that his experiences would become a source of fiscal stability.

He paved his financial path via a six-year career as a chiropractor (he's been out of the business since 2002), real estate investments and half ownership of Two Men and a Truck moving company in Delaware County (he's about to add a second location in Montgomery County). After experiencing an authentic Irish pub in Atlanta, Magrogan was intrigued enough to travel to Ireland and all around the U.S. learning about them. What he liked the most was the rich décor and high-end draft selection. "When I started Kildare's, I went at it as if there were already 100 units across the country," says Magrogan. "If the concept was well received, we were ready to grow."

And grow it has. Since opening the first Kildare's in West Chester in 2003, Magrogan has added locations in Media, King of Prussia, Center City, Manayunk and, most recently, at Montage Mountain in Scranton. In July, a yet-to-be-named restaurant focusing on more health-conscious food will debut in Honeybrook just outside Coatesville. Next up are two more Kildare's in Valley Square and Warminster. A location for a second Doc Magrogans is also being scouted.

Whether Magrogan is biting off more than he can chew remains to be seen. But one thing's for sure: With his plan for 25 locations by 2010, there's certainly not a lot of downtime on his schedule.

"Our corporate staff works seven days a week; our average corporate workday is 12 to 14 hours," says Magrogan. "Everyone is on board to create the best authentic restaurant company in the country."

Good with the Bad

A typical day for Dave Magrogan goes something like this:

7 a.m.: Read and send e-mails; verify previous night's sales at all locations.
7:30 a.m.: Workout with trainer; run three to four miles.
9 a.m.: More e-mails; make phone calls.
11 a.m.: Appointments or office work at Kildare's in West Chester.
Noon: Meet with top staff members at various locations.
8 p.m.: Dinner with wife Shannon at Kildare's or Doc's.
Midnight: Back home.

The week we'd set aside for a round of interviews, Magrogan also hosted a Miss Kildare's contest at the Headhouse Square location, drove to Scranton to check on the progress of his new Montage venture and scouted potential locations in Baltimore, Annapolis and Washington, D.C.—all capped off by a four-day jaunt to his second home in Key West with pals Mike Rody and WMMR-FM's John DeBella. "He's driven, he's who he says he is, and he's the cheapest therapist around," says DeBella. "If you're down, call Dave. He'll lift you up." Not everyone has nice things to say about DeBella's pal. "There are all kinds of rumors," says Magrogan. "My favorite was that I got my money for Kildare's by selling organs on the Internet. I loved that one so much I had shirts made that said, 'Organs for Sale!' The latest one was that I had a stripper at my bachelor party. I didn't, by the way."

And there have been other rumblings. Some say his self-made persona is all a ruse—and that he's actually being bankrolled by an aunt. "My aunt actually tried to steer me away from the restaurant business," counters Magrogan. "She's a financial genius, so when I decided to leave chiropractic, she was my sounding board for my future career goals. Initially I founded Kildare's on my own. Then, as the company grew, she decided to invest as well. We own a few properties together, and she owns about five percent of Kildare's."

Then there's the assumption that all this expansion has to come at cost, namely mounting debt. "I heard that one, too," he says. "At one point, the rumors were so rampant my purveyors started calling me."

There's also concern over Magrogan's commitment to West Chester's future. "Look at his restaurants—they all have a chain atmosphere," says one West Chester restaurateur, who requested anonymity.

"He owns the Kildare's building, but not Doc's. It's not easy to survive here if you don't own your building; it feels like he's going to flip them. Is that good for the town? Everyone's waiting for the other shoe to drop. It could be all smoke and mirrors, but maybe he really is a dynamo. There's definitely a question mark."

But while Kildare's college-bar rep has come under fire, "it's great for the economy—and Doc's has been received better than expected," says Stan Zukin, who owns the building that houses Doc's. "He's an ambitious entrepreneur with a lot of good ideas. He does a tremendous amount of charitable work. He's getting young people involved and getting them to look toward the future. We all have shortcomings, but he's definitely a horse I would bet on. I've built a lot of West Chester, and I hear more negative things about me."

Still, last year's well-publicized Mardi Gras incident—photographs of which surfaced on the Web, depicting female revelers flashing for beads on the Kildare's bar—may have cost Magrogan (who emceed that evening) some points in West Chester. "We were the No. 1 story on NBC-10 for two days," he says. "In some ways, it's a compliment to be big enough to have a story about you. Even the reporter joked, 'Sex sells.' Our sales spiked after the coverage."

Apparently, Magrogan takes criticism well. But he remains frustrated by the lack of positive feedback over his philanthropic efforts. His post-Katrina "Bring Back the Bayou" campaign has already raised \$30,000 for the Red Cross, and Magrogan has committed to raising \$70,000 more. He's also worked with the Williamson Trade School to fund construction of new homes in New Orleans.

"Everything you hear about Dave is true—unless you always hear the bad stuff," says DeBella. "Yeah, he's been wild, but I think that's behind him. You can't forget: He's 34 and his business is pubs. I've been around restaurants my whole life; you have long days, late nights, you're around drunk people. It's hard not to find yourself in crazy situations."

For his part, Magrogan tries not to sweat the small stuff. "I believe people are inherently good," he says. "And I want to keep that outlook." True to his come-what-may credo, when he got wind of a recent blog criticizing the food at the Manayunk Kildare's and citing reasons why a Doc's shouldn't come to town, he shrugged it off. "For every person who takes the time to write something negative about me, there are a hundred customers at the bar enjoying my concept," Magrogan maintains. "If you're not making waves, you're not moving forward."

A few days later, Magrogan is hosting another Miss Kildare's night at Headhouse Square and prepping for the annual St. Patrick's Day parade on Broad Street. Looking dapper in fitted jeans, a Kildare's tee and a blazer, he's surrounded by family, friends and employees, all of whom are belting out "Big Strong Man" with the Malarky Brothers and handing out Mardi Gras beads.

As the floats begin to roll, someone shouts out the rules:

"No throwing beads, no jumping on the float, no jumping off the float, hold onto the rail ..."

Just then, Magrogan shouts, "And, please. Keep your shirts on!"