

The Mayor of Charles Village

“Excuse me,” Jerry says as he jumps down from his stool and speeds past the floor-to-ceiling windows of his Baltimore grocery store. “I see ‘A Need.’” Zooming around the maroon countertop to the self-serve coffee station, he gently moves his customer aside, pulls forward a fresh coffee urn and quickly begins brewing a new batch. “I heard you hit the bottom in that one,” he says to the man, smiling. From over the counter he says to me, “Around here, I’m whatever man I’ve gotta be.”

‘Here’ is Eddie’s Market, the Charles Village grocery store which Jerry has owned for the past twenty years. I first met Jerry by the dairy section. I was peering at the fat-content percentages on milk labels when he quietly introduced himself, something he often does with frequent customers. Only a few weeks later, I was walking past the store and heard Jerry’s voice behind me, beckoning me to come in for my usual morning coffee. It was 6:30 a.m., the street was dark, and Eddie’s wasn’t due to open for another hour. “Angela,” Jerry said, in the soothing yet lecturing tone of a father as he held the door open for me, “it is never too early. We have coffee ready, come on in.”

To many, Jerry represents the small-town character of the neighborhood. In the early mornings, customers mill about the shadowy, unlit shop while Jerry hustles to unlock the door and let people in before opening time. “There are some businesses that will post an hour on the door and they will stand there and watch you outside,” he says, his voice exasperated. “Not me - I will unlock that door.” In this fashion, customers begin to trickle in each morning and Jerry calls out, “Hi Fred” “Hi Dennis” “Hi Emily.”

“I know my customers by name, and I have 1,200 per day,” he says. “At larger stores, if they even greet you they won’t know your name.”

And Jerry knows the importance of a name. For twenty years, people have asked one question: “Why isn’t Eddie’s called Jerry’s?” He answers that the name “Eddie’s” has a history: and its presence in big red letters above his front door sells more than his own name would. What’s important to him isn’t having his name in lights; it’s having his store in the green.

Eddie’s is a name Baltimoreans know. Since the first one opened in the late 1930’s, the city has been home to over twenty-five Eddie’s stores. Jerry’s grandmother’s brother, Eddie Levy, and two of his male relatives started the first Eddie’s in Dundalk and spawned the franchise that spread across Baltimore. At the same time, Giant food stores were rapidly growing in and around the DC area.

But, unlike Giant, that became wildly successful, twenty-one of the original 23 Eddie’s eventually shut down, as profits declined or owners retired. Eddie’s shops disappeared one by one. To Jerry, there was only one difference between the two chains: “Giant was owned by brothers, and it spelled their success,” while Eddie’s shops were bought and sold to individual franchisees. But Jerry, who has witnessed a lot of change in Baltimore over the past five decades, isn’t nostalgic. “I never cared about the Eddie’s chain. I just care about this store.” He cared enough about it that, about a decade ago when the store was losing money and sales were hitting their lowest point, he asked the advice of local residents, dipped deep into his savings, and completely renovated the store.

One major change was vaulting the ceiling in the front of the store, allowing the sunlight from the large, plate glass windows that make up the front wall of the store to illuminate the area around the short registers. A maroon lunch counter and tall black chairs wrap around the far

front corner of the store, and tucked into the small space between that and the ice cream freezers is the self serve coffee station. Just inside the front door is a produce section, and behind the four main aisles is a full service deli. It's easy to find just about any product in Eddie's, from the basics like milk and bread to more sophisticated items like hummus, pine nuts, fresh crab cakes, coconut milk, tahini, fresh cilantro, brie, and gourmet chocolates. And Jerry guiding customers through the aisles to find what they need is a common sight.

Now 55, Jerry has a bit of gray creeping into his moustache and sideburns, but when he began at Eddie's he was a 14-year-old kid pulling shifts at his dad's shop. Jerry's father, the son of the original Eddie, managed all twenty-six Eddie's, owning three himself. Jerry caught rides to work after school and learned the family trade from the bottom up: bagging groceries, weighing produce, and, once he was 16, making deliveries in the store's old station wagon. "It was great that my dad was G.M.," he recalls. "One of the managers used to let me come in, sign in, and leave, and I would get paid for it." His small, alert eyes and thin face pinch into a smile. "It wasn't like I was this 16 year-old kid who couldn't wait to grow up to be a professional grocer."

It wasn't until he was 24 years old that he came to work full time at the store. He had graduated from college with an accounting degree, bopped around Europe dreaming of becoming a writer, even gave dentistry a shot until science courses convinced him differently. Then his dad called him, and asked him bluntly, "Have you found a job yet?" When he answered no, he told him to start Monday at the store. "In the beginning I hated it because I felt like I could do more than run my dad's store." At some point he read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, and that changed the way he viewed his life. His goal became "just to be the best at what I do," and he began to truly enjoy running the store. "I love what I do," he says. "I don't say I love the

grocery business; it could be any business. I love people, I love this grocery business, I love this store, I love the situation I'm in."

If there is one thing more important to Jerry than the store, it's his family, and there's no real divide between the two. His wife Darlene is in the shop regularly, helping run the business, and his two daughters often spent summer breaks working in the store. But that wasn't the case. Jerry had always run the store on his own and when, seven or eight years ago Darlene decided to help out, Jerry he wasn't keen on sharing his domain. "This was my career, and I didn't want to be usurped by her." But he wasn't. Darlene had spent years as a schoolteacher, had raised their two daughters, and simply "had no interest in running the store," Jerry says. "She came in and was a total joy. She became the 'ma' in 'ma and pa.'"

As business flourished, they were able to send both daughters to private school at Baltimore's Park School. "It's the happiest place on earth," Jerry says with a smile. He and Darlene wanted their children to grow up in a place where free thought, independence, and personal responsibility were encouraged. Their efforts paid off. Annie, the older, recently finished medical school and Jamie, law school. "I almost think, they were so good, it's hard to believe I'm their father." His eyes crinkle as he smiles.

In his own youth, long before he became convinced that the grocery business was right for him, markets and shops seemed to serve as the guideposts that organized his thoughts, and now define his memories. When he recalls his high school years at Baltimore's City College, he mostly remembers hanging out at Ameche's burger place. When he was 19, he met Darlene in the parking lot of Suburban House Restaurant in Pikesville. When he tells a story, he invariably mentions the corners where markets used to stand, why one fell through, why another made it, who owned them, who sold them and who bought them. When Jerry talks, he talks markets.

“This is a penny business,” Jerry calls out at 7 a.m. as he counts the newspapers just delivered. “Profits are pennies on the dollar. I sell this paper for fifty cents and buy it for 41 cents. If I lose it, I have to sell four more to make up for it.”

Bending over the pile of newspaper the delivery woman has just plopped onto the counter, Jerry asks, “You got 41 Suns?”

She checks her delivery receipt and says, “42.”

Making sure that his receipt accurately shows what he gets, Jerry recounts the papers. “Now I’ve got 43.”

The woman leans against the register counter, resigned to wait as he counts yet again. He finishes this third count and, finally appeased, glances back at her. With the air of one who is satisfied that all is right in the world as long as one’s ledgers balance, he hands one back to her.

Then he zips away, off to check the coffee-station again. “Its fun to be me,” Jerry says pausing. “I have a great job. I have a great life. I’ve been so lucky.”