

FAMILY VALUES

Ryan Love takes first steps down his father's community-minded path

Ryan Love may be in the business of selling sweets, but his answers aren't sugar-coated. At just 24 years old, Love is as genuine as they come. Like the confections from his family's namesake company (he's the son of well-known Southwest Florida chocolatier Norman Love), Ryan is sweet but not cloying and complex but still easy to like.

And just like his father, Love is poised to become a charity champion for Southwest Florida. Now a board member for the Big Brother Big Sisters (BBBS) of Lee County, Love is helping spearhead what will hopefully become the local not-for-profit's new signature event.

"It was actually his idea," says Angela Melvin, the group's executive director, outlining how the 2013 Chef's Cooking for Kids Gala came to be. "He said, 'why don't we do something with chefs,' and we chose this model."

The event, which will be held April 18 at the Club at Grandezza, will feature 20 of the area's top chefs, each showcasing tapas-sized samples of their best dishes.

And while Love definitely has a lot of hope riding on his shoulders — something that is almost inevitable when you enter into the same business as your rock-star father — so too does this event.

Two years ago, the BBBS chapter of Lee County had to shut its doors after being, what the head office called, "out of compliance."

"Hundreds of matches, bigs and littles, were left without an agency to serve them," says Melvin. The agency went dark until the Sun Coast Chapter — based in Venice — reached out to help. Melvin was instated as the Lee County executive director in December, and this event is a chance to prove that things are getting back to normal.

Or, Love hopes, better than normal.

"I guess the good thing about everything being new is that there isn't someone saying, 'but we've always done it this way,'" he says adding, "We can really make it our own."

STORY BY ANNE CLAIRE SHILTON
PHOTO BY TERRY ALLEN WILLIAMS



Ryan Love » **Age:** 24 » **Birthplace:** Los Angeles, California » **Education:** Graduate of Fort Myers High School, received a bachelor's degree in restaurant management from the University of Central Florida and headed to the French Pastry School in Chicago later this year. » **Career:** Works at Norman Love Confections » **Family:** Parents Norman and Mary Love; and younger sister Carly Love. » **Personal interests:** Love enjoys watching hockey, and is a huge Pittsburgh Penguins fan. He also enjoys mixed martial arts and hitting the gym. And even though Love sees his family at work, he still makes time for a family dinner at least once a week.



While these words sound like they might be coming from someone bristling at the idea of doing things they way they've always been done, that's hardly the case. Love is preparing to attend pastry school in Chicago at the French Pastry School, an institution known for its devotion to tradition. And he's working his way up in his father's company from the bottom — doing things the way they've been done for years.

Instead, Love's words simply reflect his ability to see the bright side of things. Yes, it's hard restarting a charity, but if there's a silver lining, Love will find it. And that — his shameless ability to highlight the good — coupled with his intense work ethic and his devotion to do-gooding, makes Love easy to like.

"One of the earliest charities that I can remember my mom being a very large supporter/member of was the Heights Foundation located in Harlem Heights off of Gladiolus. It was in the backyard of my parents' home, so this prompted my mom to take a very keen interest in the foundation. She helped raise a large amount of money and was a key member in forming a number of different events that directly supported the Heights Foundation.

"I suppose this sticks out the most to me because it was an area of town that had a very poor reputation and it also happened to be a place that I drove by every day. I witnessed the transformation of that neighborhood and it struck a chord within me and helped show me that one person really can make a difference."

Despite his young age, Melvin says that he's a deeply respected member of the board. At meetings, people lean in to hear his ideas. And when it's time to stop brainstorming and start working, Love rolls up his sleeves.

"It was really telling when he was willing to pound the pavement with me," says Melvin, describing how the two went door-to-door recruiting chefs for the event. "He'd meet me in the afternoons and I'd know that he'd been up,

going, since 3 a.m. in his dad's shop. That really impressed me."

She says that having the Love name has truly helped her group gain traction with the county's hotshot chefs. When people hear Norman Love is behind something, they quickly ask where they too can sign up. When they see the logo on Ryan's chef coat and realize he's part of the Love Clan it instantly opens doors.

But while the Love name carries plenty of weight, Ryan seems relatively unburdened by it. He admits that there's a certain pressure that comes with joining the family business (which he almost didn't do, when he left for college he wanted to be a computer programmer), but mostly he sees it as an opportunity.

"My favorite thing about working for my family is that I get to be in front of them and grow and that I have the opportunity to impress them." Though, he adds, "Sometimes it can be a bit overbearing to be around your family every day, but it's not too bad."

Currently Love is working in his father's kitchen, preparing the ganache used in the truffles. He admits that he had "zero kitchen experience" when he started, so he's happy to start at the bottom and climb his way up like everyone else. And he's devoted to doing what's right for the family business, even if that puts his own goals on hold.

"What's my 10-year plan? I couldn't tell you. Maybe I could tell you my 5-year plan but even that's a little uncertain. I'm going to pastry school and I'd like to go overseas and continue my education there, but that decision will be heavily based on where we stand as a company. The company is my first obligation."

His second obligation, however, is the community.

"My dad taught me that those that have the opportunity to provide have the social responsibility to do so. And he's my idol. He showed me that when you start giving back you really become loved and it really becomes your home and your world." **G**

If you go » **What:** Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lee County's inaugural Chefs Cooking for Kids event **» When:** April 18, 6-9 p.m. **» Where:** The Club at Grandezza, 11481 Grande Oak Blvd Estero **» Info:** Visit bbssun.org and click on events.