Chances are, you know Don

Between his food, giving and personality, retired restaurateur Don Finsen has left an indelible mark on the Skagit Valley

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LA CONNER — When Don Finsen opened his first of seven restaurants, his hot turkey sandwiches cost 50 cents and the cold ones a quarter.

One sandwich at a time, Finsen has saved enough money to give significant donations to the community so others can learn the culinary arts and rescue unwanted animals.

Finsen's Turkey House, which started in 1948 on Sharpes Corner, became famous for its hot sandwiches. They included stuffing handmade by Finsen on the stovetop and turkey roasted fresh every day.

Finsen got into the restaurant business when an opportunity arose to rent a building on Sharpes Corner. Having worked retail at JC Penney in downtown Mount Vernon, he never looked back and became an unstoppable restaurateur.

He didn't retire until he was 75 years old.

"I'd been doing it so long it was my nature," Finsen, now 88, said during an interview at his La Conner home. "It was just my life."

Between his food and his personality, he has made a significant mark on the Skagit County area.

"We never go anywhere that either a) someone hasn't eaten there or b) someone worked for him," said his "lady friend," Rae Allen, a former employee of his, who lives with him.

Linda Holliman, who now works at an Anacortes branch of Peoples Bank, said Finsen was her "first real boss" after she grew up working in the fields. She worked at Don's at the Mall in the mid'70s.

"He was awesome to work for," Holliman said. "He took the whole staff out on his boat to Deer Harbor on Orcas Island for dinner. I was young and it made a lasting impression on me that a boss would put that kind of time and money into his employees and showed that he cared about us."

Finsen's restaurants included Turkey Houses on Sharpes Corner and Conway, Jet Drive Inns in Mount Vernon and near Deception Pass, Don's at the Mall in Mount Vernon, House of Turkey (later the Cranberry Tree) and Don's Restaurant in Marysville.

The restaurants closed for various reasons, except in Marysville, where Don's is open under different ownership. Several were put out of business when roads were expanded or moved.

Through it all, Finsen made enough money to stash away and later contribute to the community. Most recently, he set up a $20,000 endowment for the culinary arts program at Skagit Valley College.

"That's a fantastic amount," said Carl Young, the college's Foundation director. "It means that we can start to help students in a significant way very soon. We're always grateful for people wanting to pass along support for students in their field."

Finsen contributed $100,000 when the Humane Society of Skagit County built its new building, and for the past two years he has donated $25,000 for the animals there. One of the building's wings is named after him. His own black poodle, Sammy, came from the shelter.

Finsen's secret to success is really not that secret.

"Work hard. Reasonable prices. Good help," he said. "On-site cooking is very important. You don't find that very much any more."

Finsen said he still has back problems from lifting so many 28-pound turkeys out of the oven. But that doesn't stop him from continuing to love them.

Turkey is still his favorite food.

Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Don Finsen and his dog, Sammy, relax at Finsen's home. Sammy came from the Humane Society of Skagit Valley, one of Finsen's favorite causes.