

A portrait of Michelle Schlingmann, a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white button-down shirt and a pearl necklace. She is smiling and standing in what appears to be a restaurant or bar setting with warm lighting and hanging lights in the background.

# Michelle Schlingmann

**COO at American Dreams Restaurant Group**

Now COO of American Dreams Restaurant Group with two downtown Sarasota restaurants—Duval’s Fresh Local Seafood and Element Modern Mediterranean Grill—she was tapped by entrepreneur Jim Abrams to become his chief operating officer in September.

The two go back to 2000 when she worked for him in Missouri at Clockwork Home Services—a business that achieved \$1 billion in sales in 2009.

In her new position she has many important roles—one of them meeting with the two restaurant managers once a week and spending time one-on-one every day with both. The company plans to open Plaza Bistro-n-Tavern, a full food restaurant with craft beverages next door to Element. And she adds, “Watch for future endeavors.”





Relationship building is the foundation of successful people and companies. Sometimes

a relationship continues after a person leaves the company where the relationship grew roots and a person may cross paths—intentionally or accidentally—with another person long after one has left the business. Such is the case with Michelle Schlingmann and Jim Abrams who are working together in Sarasota after Michelle ventured into another direction, but remained in contact.

Now CEO of American Dreams Restaurant Group with two upscale downtown Sarasota restaurants—Duval’s Fresh Local Seafood and Element Modern Mediterranean Grill—Jim tapped Michelle to become his chief operating officer in September.

After a career in hospitality and entertainment, Michelle began working for Jim in 2000 in Clayton, Missouri. He says, “Michelle worked in my prior company, Clockwork Home Services (I was founder and CEO) and she was a critical contributor in making that company the fastest growing home services company in the world, growing from \$2.7 million in 1999 to over \$1 billion in system wide sales in 2009. She served in many different roles and succeeded in each. Her attention to detail, her enthusiasm, and most of all, her caring about our customers and the people who worked with her were unique.”

In 2013 Michelle left the company to work at Feld Entertainment in Palmetto, a leader in live entertainment extravaganzas such as Disney on Ice, Disney Live, Sesame Street Live, and others. She says she was extremely happy at Feld, appreciated, and enjoyed the challenge of the position.

After six years, Jim Abrams contacted Michelle about the COO position. Since she didn’t know the restaurant business, she says leaving her comfort zone at Feld to enter an unknown variable was risky. After a lot of thinking and discussion with her husband about the job commitments, Michelle accepted the position. Jim says, “Michelle is an exceptional businessperson, but more importantly, an exceptional person. When seeking someone to lead our family restaurant holdings, American Dreams Restaurant Group (ADRG), Michelle’s name was at the top of the list. We’re excited she was able to see the vision and opportunity within our business and leave a successful career to join us. We’re headquartered in the Plaza at 5 Points building in Sarasota, as was our past business. When we announced Michelle was joining our organization, the property management personnel all cheered. This speaks clearly as to Michelle’s loving and caring nature and the way she treats everyone. In the service business, this caring about the experience of your customers and staff is essential for success. I’m confident Michelle will lead ADRG to great success and enhance our employee and guests’ experience.”

About her new position, Michelle says, “We’re undergoing a culture shift and also a business shift. Change is difficult for some. We tell the employees that they will not always get what they want, but we’re seeing positive energy and positive vibes. It’s a turnaround for the better with no staff turnover yet. With responsibility for day-today operations, I meet with the two restaurant managers once a week and spend time one-

on-one every day with each one to hear how I can help them to help their employees. Soon will we open Plaza Bistro-n-Tavern, a full food restaurant with craft beverages, nonalcoholic mock-tails, and wine next door to Element. And watch for future endeavors.”


Michelle relates what she calls a bizarre story of how she ended up in the hospitality and entertainment industry beginning at the College of Physicians Library in Philadelphia where a doctor (Nancy Reagan’s brother) wanted only her to deliver books to him. In the mid-1980’s she helped on a special event where C. Everett Koop, Surgeon General of the United States, was present. She later worked for the City of Philadelphia in tourism and development where she planned city-wide events with (mentor) Meryl Levitz, the President and CEO of Visit Philadelphia. Later she moved to Missouri after being recruited by a pyrotechnics company as program director to run music fests and major national fireworks shows including the Super Bowl half-time show.



Seated on the patio of Element, Michelle is dressed in a dark skirt suit and heels and exudes confidence and professionalism. Despite the fact that she describes herself as quirky, she is all business, but with an approachable demeanor. When asked about her major responsibilities, she says, “I do everything. A woman does it all without whining. That means a work day that begins in the office at 5 a.m. and ends about 9 p.m. When the restaurants are open especially from 5 to 7 p.m., I am visible. I do not see problems; I see opportunities. I am vocal. I do not let things fester. I am transparent. Everyone is human and makes mistakes. I am motivated to get past the challenge. I am honest and caring and want to be a compassionate colleague.”

Michelle adds, “My goal is to build a nurturing and caring professional environment where all employees feel welcome and are customer-centric all the time. We want our employees to smile so even if customers are having a bad day, they will smile, too. The challenge is consistency. We want the smile factor 100 percent of the time. With staff training, sales will be up with the hope that we eventually be able to offer vacation and other perks. We want to create a company where employees are part of a family. We want people who are willing to invest time to improve their skillset.”

Michelle encourages people who don’t frequent downtown to come walk Main Street, State Street, and surrounding streets. There’s something for everyone in downtown Sarasota, she feels.

Michelle was born and raised in Philadelphia. Her mother retired from Colonial Penn Insurance Company and her father is deceased. Her husband Michael Schlingmann is a truck driver and her son Edward Lomax works in Brandon. Her comfort foods are grilled cheese and cookies. In her downtime, she walks to help her think and reads mostly business books, but will occasionally read Richard Wright. Even though she has never attended a Formula I race, she hope to someday attend one every weekend.

The best advice Michelle received was in 1986 at the College of Physicians: If you can read about it, you can figure out how to do it. The restaurant business may be new to her, but no doubt she has already figured it out. 

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