

## Faith, ambition push Chester's up-and-coming soul food diva

By Sean Crane  
*Tribune Correspondent*

On faith, Cheryl Stevens gave up a steady job with benefits to follow her passion and calling: cooking for others.

Stevens started her restaurant and catering service after hearing her pastor give a sermon urging church members to use their God-given talents.

"The next day, I sat with my boss and gave two weeks notice," Stevens said.

Cheryl's Southern Style, "Food for the Body and Soul," at 525 Welsh St. in Chester, is a blossoming storefront restaurant with a walk-up window. Inside there are delicious aromas and six seats.

Since startup, Stevens' personality, abiding faith and persistence have seen her through a difficult first two years in the restaurant business. Dave Sciochetti, executive director of the Chester Economic Development Authority, said, "Cheryl has a great idea with what she wants to be doing, and is determined to make it succeed."

Stevens credits family, friends and church members, and a few unnamed "angels" with making her initial success possible. Lately, she has some local agencies, including Sciochetti's CEDA and other nonprofits to thank. In the last three months Cheryl's Southern Style has received five economic boosts from four separate agencies that recognize her heartfelt commitment to nourishing the Chester community, and her willingness to develop a business plan.

The business started on a shoestring, a prayer and hap-

penstance nearly two years ago, Stevens said. She heard about a storefront that was vacant, and just kept following fate from there. "Things just kept opening up," Stevens said. In following her heart and doing what she just somehow knew she was to do, Cheryl has, in short order, earned a reputation for producing food and a message that both come from the heart.

On a 52-inch TV in the back of the restaurant, Stevens plays Christian and inspirational videotapes. "I noticed one woman just standing there looking at the tapes," she said. "After a while we started talking, and the woman confessed

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Cheryl Stevens recently opened Cheryl's Southern Style soul food restaurant, in Chester. She is planning on expanding the business.



Cheryl Stevens, owner of Cheryl's Southern Style, is planning on expanding her soul food cooking business to catering.

to having missed three buses just to be able to watch them."

Stevens has earned a devoted following as well. Shelby McKnight does some of the buying for meetings, and conferences at Wells Fargo in their new Chester waterfront facility. "We have been ordering from Cheryl's since we've moved here," McKnight said. "Cheryl made this baked fish with yellow and red peppers on top and this real buttery sauce and ... that was really good."

Sciochetti said CHDA has a dozen or fewer loans out for start-up businesses such as Stevens'. "In addition to drawing large businesses here, we are working to support smaller businesses like Cheryl's that can offer needed goods and services to the bigger businesses that come."

Through demonstrating winning personal qualities, and serving food that receives rave reviews, Stevens has gained the support of her family, church, community, local businesses and nonprofit agencies in making her business a success.

In the last two months, Stevens has received three loans and two grants to help fund the catering end of the business. She hopes that by expanding catering she will be able to then make some interior changes to allow more seating.

In February Stevens received a \$5,000 loan from the Chester Economic Development Authority, and a \$5,000 loan from Philadelphia Development Partnership. March 30 she received a \$2,500 loan from the Women's Opportunity Resource Center in Philadelphia.

Stevens has used the proceeds of these loans to buy the equipment she needed to take her much sought-after menu of soul food and other cuisine on the road. She has also added a fax machine and a credit card machine, since many orders for catering and lunches use credit cards. These improvements recently proved useful when Stevens and her crew served 400 meals to three shifts at the Christiana Hospital's employee appreciation day ceremonies.

In addition to the loans, Stevens also received a \$1,000 grant from the Women's Opportunity Resource Center in Philadelphia. Hers was one of nine businesses out of more than 70 applicants statewide to receive this grant.

Cheryl's Southern Style also received a \$500 grant and free Internet service for a year through the efforts of Covad Communications and the Philadelphia Development

Partnership. These funds were used to supplement catering-related purchases and to prepare a Web site that will go online before May 1 through Stevens' affiliation with the Black Yellow Pages.

In addition to welcoming phone or fax orders at (610) 874-4767, Stevens' customers will be able to see the store and the menu by going to [www.CherylSouthernStyle.com](http://www.CherylSouthernStyle.com).