



# FOODSERVICE CONSULTANT



## *Wylie creative*

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**William Caruso** FFCSI spent his formative years working in the family's grocery and restaurant businesses. It was a head start that paved the way for a dazzling career, as he explains to Sue Holaday

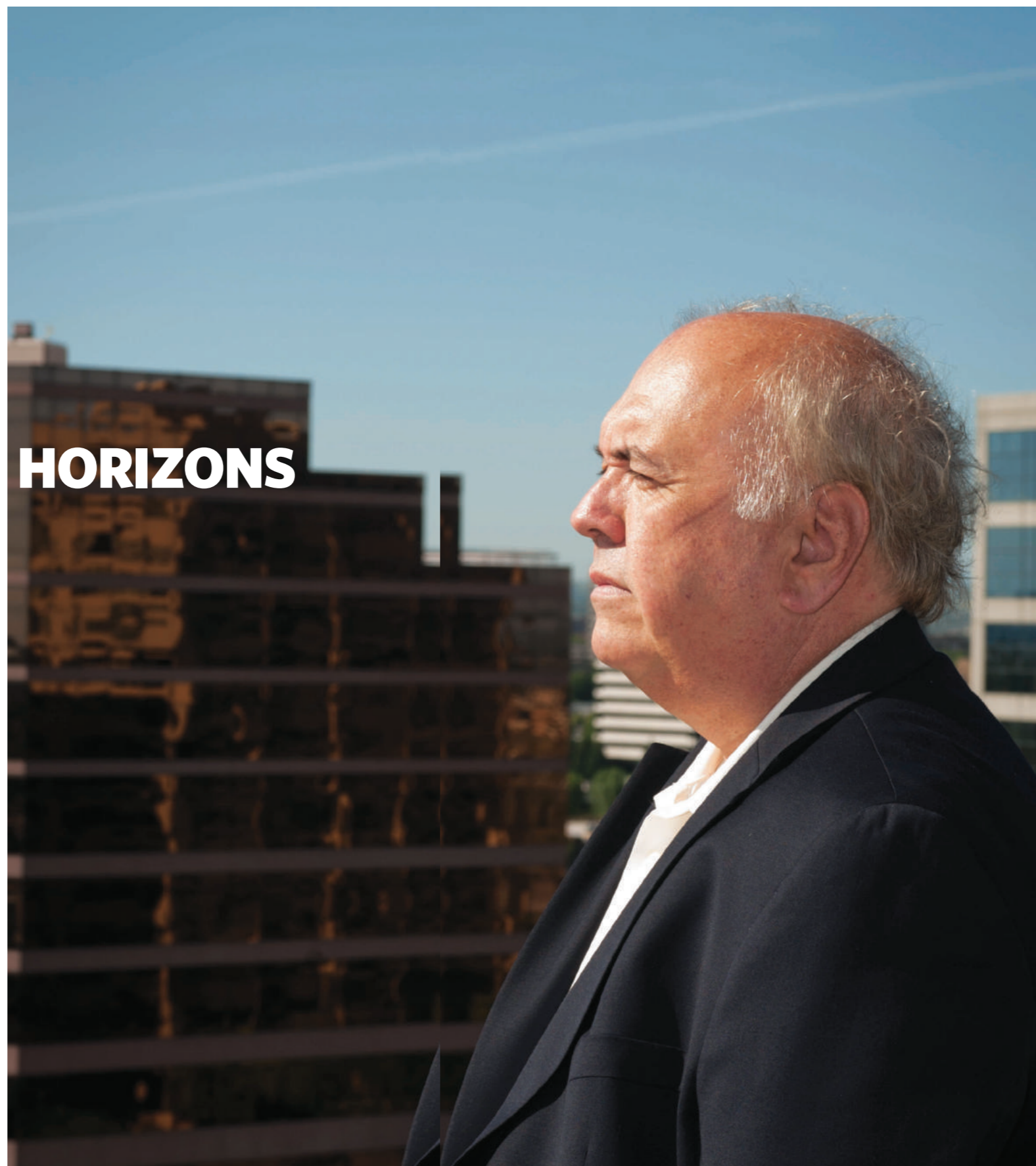
## EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS

If a person can be characterised by one thing, William (Bill) Caruso FFCSI, ISHC, president and principal of WCA (William Caruso & Associates), would be seen as a lifelong student, a man who never stops learning and is fearless about exploring new horizons. "If a person says they are not learning, they are lying to you," he declares.

His career as a consultant came about after a childhood influenced by his father and uncles, who worked in restaurants and grocery stores. By the age of 12, Caruso was working in his uncle's grocery store, and at 16 he "went to work doing every odd job possible" in his dad's restaurant. "I thought that restaurant success was in meeting/greeting people, providing good food and drink, and all else would take care of itself! Was I wrong!" he says. "I learned quickly that it costs a lot of money for food and beverage and that staff need to be paid as well. But I loved the interaction of people, product, ambiance of the physical place and

the delicate balance between the cost of keeping the doors open and keeping people happy – guests and staff alike." From his early childhood, Caruso has been motivated to "be the best that he could be". Following his family into the hospitality business, he entered Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, seen as the school where "the best and brightest" trained. "Unfortunately, my ideas didn't match theirs, and they decided I was 'not right for them'," he recalls. Undaunted, he enrolled at the University of Denver's School of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management where he did well, and in two years transferred to Cornell, where he managed to take a number of courses in planning and design, along with finance and business development studies. Following graduation, Caruso enrolled in the Army, serving in the Infantry Heavy Artillery area.

Coming back to civilian life, he began a career on the foodservice side of the industry with Interstate



United as general manager of an insurance company foodservice account. He later joined Allied Stores' Almart Division where he oversaw 100 department store restaurant operations.

A decision to earn his MBA led Caruso to the University of Colorado, where an emphasis on the business development side, including international business development and strategic planning, turned out to be particularly helpful throughout his career, helping him develop an international client base.

A lucky break came after graduation when he saw a job posting from Toronto, Canada, from Harley Little Associates.

He'd been hoping to find a consulting post and despite stiff

competition, he was hired and joined after a year's wait for his immigration papers, in search of new horizons, "the possibility of working on multiple projects in many lands, and the excitement of travel". The world of consulting, Caruso says, offered that.

It was the start of a long career that led to his founding William Caruso & Associates in 1986. Today, Caruso is recognised as a leader in his field where he's worked on more than 1,000 projects. His strengths, he believes, lie on the management/financial side of the business as opposed to the design side.

Today, mentoring is important to him as he pays back his own early mentors, men who, Caruso declares, "began foodservice consulting as we know it in North America" and include Jim Little, Fred Schmid and

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Richard Flambert, as well as his father. “They were all icons and legends and I learned much from each of them.”

It was Jim Little who gave him the first opportunity to be a foodservice consultant in 1973 and to this day, Caruso recalls key things he learned from him: “Think big; be professional in all you do; look professional at all times; don’t be afraid to talk the talk and walk the walk; remember, professional services demand professional fees; don’t ever give up; and be humble in all you say and do.”

Consulting proved stimulating and rewarding for Caruso. Looking back over a satisfying career of 44 years, he points to milestones such as the introduction of computers and design programs, automation, upgraded systems and engineered programs, acceptance of independent consultants by clients, and worldwide development and growth of the independent food facilities consulting industry.

“I think that FCSI plays a crucial role in our industry for many reasons,” Caruso says, pointing to the opportunities it offers for educational advancement and its role in “binding worldwide markets into a common bond and goal”. In addition, he declares, it separates professional consultants from those who don’t practice at the same standards.

Caruso became an FCSI Fellow in 1986, and over the years it has been a source of great pride. “I am proud,” he says, “to be in the company of a small, select group of individuals whom I admire for their hard work and achievements, and I bow to those ‘masters of the trade’ who are no longer with us – and that

includes many industry icons over the years.”

While Caruso takes pride in the many projects he’s been part of throughout his career, one in particular stands out as a favorite – the renovation of Boston’s Fenway Park for the Red Sox in 1987.

Growing up in New Jersey, he played baseball competitively, and Fenway was always an iconic venue. Caruso and his team led the charge into sports arena foodservice, he recalls, and since that project, they have completed similar jobs at 162 stadiums and arenas.

“It was a ‘good old boy’ effect. I loved working with the Red Sox family,” Caruso recalls.

What they wanted, he says, was unique, and Caruso was able to set

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new design and systems standards such as central beverage systems and other additions considered ‘new wave’ at the time.

“I love the interaction with the team and the front office and the ability to talk baseball jargon with them and have it actually affect foodservice results.”

The job involved Caruso’s favorite area of design – central fluidics systems. “We wanted to be able to serve the customers faster and to create clubs behind home plate. We worked with friends with central beverage distribution systems to run the beer through lines that were wrapped in glycol so they didn’t have to move big kegs around. The central system was one of the first of its kind. Today, you have similar systems for wine and even liquor.”

Caruso has enjoyed interacting with people ever since he can remember, and believes his level of social comfort and ease came from his father, whom he calls “an excellent communicator”.



William ‘Bill’ Caruso with one of his many project designs, and (opposite page) with a Boston Red Sox helmet



▶ **FOUR MOST SIGNIFICANT PROJECTS**

**Vancouver Convention Center**

The first major Canadian project, the Vancouver Convention Center, involved many partners, from the Province of British Columbia to Centerplate, the foodservice contractor, and the architectural team, working together to create a new building on an historic waterfront where it connected to the original structure by a corridor. The first ever convention center to win LEED Platinum, it makes a major commitment to green technology. Caruso created a new state-of-the-art scratch kitchen with windows, as well as a special pastry kitchen in the East Building and an Old World pastry shop. He remembers the project as “a smashing success”.

**Singapore General Hospital**

Key elements at Singapore General, Singapore’s largest acute tertiary hospital founded in 1821, included planning and design of halal and non-halal departments within an existing kitchen, and planning for a new patient meal delivery system to all wards in the hospital (from which meals are then served directly to patients). Various types of menus – halal, non-halal, East Indian halal, Asian, local Singaporean and Malaysian and some North American-style were offered.

**NYU Abu Dhabi**

Planning of a brand new campus at NYU Abu Dhabi necessitated all-new design. Elements included student unions, residence halls, cafés and related outlets in libraries and other campus buildings, quick-service food within various schools, concessions in sports facilities, full-service dining for faculty club, and staff dining area. Like Singapore, many unique styles of foods are served, including modified/ gluten-free, and to various campus constituencies.

**Madison Square Garden**

At the same time as Abu Dhabi, the Madison Square Garden project came along involving developing new, first-class food and beverage amenities including new club spaces and hospitality areas. Initially a brand new foodservice facility was designed for the Farley Post Office behind the garden, but that plan was dropped in favour of renovating the old facility. “We redid it to be a fun spot,” Caruso notes, “with an area for exclusive products from major celebrity chefs. Concession stands were integrated into the main concourse to better engage with fans. It was a very, very tough job with complex issues.” The transformation of the 130-year-old garden cost close to \$1bn.

Many of his clients over the years have become close and loyal friends, a fact he views as the greatest compliment anyone could receive. “I’m a people person,” he says. “We start with a client and go through thick and thin.” Along the way, trust and friendships develop.

Looking at the industry and its evolution, Caruso sees a robust ‘scene’ today but one he believes contracts and expands more now than it ever did in the past. The most pressing business challenges, he says, are finding qualified, bright, educated people and policing the value/cost relationship.

Over the years, he’s learned a lot about communication. “I can recollect one major project many years ago where the architect had a sense that we should be working exclusively on their project, and since they saw me and one of our senior people at a conference in Europe that they were also attending, were put out as to why we were ‘wasting’ our time there rather than working back home on their project, which had a major deadline approaching. Unfortunately, I tried to explain that we had many others working on the job in our absence, but this issue caused a negative communications gap. Ultimately, we finished the project, it opened on time and we were on budget, but the negative comments back and forth caused us to lose this major client for a number of years.

“Just recently, we rekindled the working relationship, which is very good for us. But that experience taught me that upfront, careful communication with certain clients who may have bigger egos than others is very important, and you have to quickly gauge which clients fall into this very high, continual maintenance category and ask >

yourself if this is the type of client you really want to have over the long run anyway.”

Today, consultants have to think big and market effectively, Caruso says. “I’m a controversial guy,” he points out, declaring that consultants today have lost market share in a marketplace that has become ultra-competitive.

Clients are on a quicker schedule, he adds, and consultants’ margins are smaller. “You’ve got to know the return on investment and how to use financial tools.

“Somewhere along the way, consultants, who once thought big, began thinking smaller.” And today, other industry segments such as foodservice equipment dealers, overlap in what can be a free-for-all, he notes, adding that consultants need to stress that they are at a certain level by marketing, thinking bigger and re-inventing.

“Unfortunately, there has been much change since I began, and I do not like some of the changes that are taking place in the industry,” says Caruso. “There are many reasons for this, but most have been caused by extreme competitive processes and the need to ‘value engineer’ each project, with bottom line cost being the key decision point factor.

“Some issues that plague both the consulting world and our industry in general are as follows: contracts written for consulting and contractor services based primarily on price, not quality, service, experience or ability to complete the work on time and budget. ‘Value engineering’ has a permanent spot on almost all projects these days. Substitutions are approved by owners’ representatives based on price not ‘equal’ in many situations.”

Caruso misses the old one-on-one negotiations that were based on trust



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and past history between consultants and clients. In today’s world, bidding has taken over all major projects, and he questions that policy.

Caruso believes that “if you don’t know how to run a business, you have a problem”. He advises consultants to “bone up before you get

into the shark tank”.

“This may be controversial,” he adds, “but I say it from the heart. Margins today are much less and we have to give a quicker turnaround.”

He sees today’s students looking at other areas and industry professions. “I don’t know if they understand that they have to work hard and pay their dues.” As an industry segment, foodservice consultants need to do a better job of explaining that, he believes.

Looking to the future and

potential areas of growth for consultants, Caruso sees healthcare growing and large international projects continuing to be important. Caruso believes there is a need to “market harder and more professionally to service users”.

“Fifteen years ago if I was asked what would grow, I would have said stadiums, arenas, convention centres, entertainment centres.

“Today,” he continues, “I see a lot of big public works projects and healthcare – that’s the movement for the future. They will continue to grow. We’re also seeing bigger and bigger prisons being built with food and beverage funding.”

On a personal note, Caruso says that he is happiest meeting new clients and travelling the world. His career has been a joy that has led to lots of travel and plenty of new connections with new clients – and kicking back on the beach is a favourite pastime. To relax, he admits with a chuckle: “I have to get away at least every six months.” ■