

Debbie Pitchman, right, is all smiles with her corporate managers, from left, Jason Hale, director of operations; and her two sons, Michael and Matthew Richman, vice presidents. General managers of each of the area Steak N Shake restaurants in the back row are, from left, Glomar Huerta, Christopher Chandler, Matthew Elder, Cyndi Bowen, Elizabeth Silvey and Joreen Gainer.



## The Sizzle Returns

### Steak 'N' Shake franchisee Debbie Richman rebounds from recession

BY DAVE FLESSNER

**I**n her first five years in business, Debbie Richman was hungry to add more to her plate. As a Steak N Shake franchisee, she opened five Steak N Shake restaurants in the Chattanooga area and five years later she added a sixth location in Athens, Tenn.

But when the Great Recession hit in 2008, Richman was forced to put the business on a bit of a diet. She closed the Athens unit and cut menu prices at her other restaurants.

"It was really tough in 2008, 2009 and 2010 and I think I was as close to bankruptcy as I could be without actually having to file," she says. "But we hung in there, tried to take care of our employees and customers and

fortunately the business has come back. Last year, I was able to pay back a lot of debt to help my operating income."

Lowering customer prices helped spur more business, but Richman hasn't lowered the health, retirement or other benefits for her full-time staff, which has earned her national attention in the industry. Last year, Richman's Debo's Diners Inc. was recognized as Franchisee of the Year by Steak N Shake. She's even looking at other sites to add more restaurants in the region.

Richman came to Chattanooga in 1995 after working for Steak N Shake and other restaurant chains in Indianapolis. She started as a server so she knows the restaurant business up close and personal. Her two sons, Michael and Matthew, now help her manage the 400-employee business.

"If you take care of people, they take care of you," she says.

Photography by Tim Barber