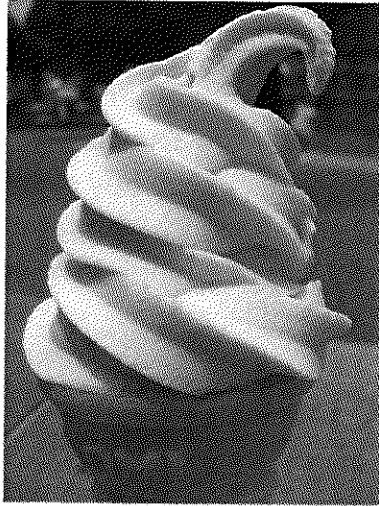


The Inside Scoop

By Michael Stahl
(Adapted by ReadWorks)



In New York City, one of the most popular brands of ice cream comes from a company called Mister Softee. Mister Softee sells ice cream to both children and adults right out of a large blue-and-white truck. Gus Elefantis has been a Mister Softee truck driver since the mid-1980s. He has made Mister Softee ice cream his career, and the tasty, smooth ice cream has helped him make a few friends, too.

Gus's summer days begin at about 8 a.m. He and his wife Lola wake up to make breakfast for their two daughters. Once breakfast is finished, Gus and Lola leave their daughters at home. They drive 20 minutes to a Mister Softee ice cream truck parking lot. Gus parks his very own ice cream truck there every night next to about twelve others.

As soon as they arrive, Lola begins cleaning his truck and filling it with ice cream pops and frozen ices. She places them into freezer compartments, or sections, to be sold once Gus drives along his route. "Everything's in the same place every day," says Lola. "This way, my husband doesn't even have to think!"

Gus agrees, saying he won't even need to look inside the freezer as he fills orders for the long lines of customers.

Gus explains that Lola has cleaned the truck for over 20 years, ever since they were first married. “She’s the best at it,” he says with a heavy Greek accent. “I’ve tried to clean the truck plenty of times before, but I’m no good at it. When Lola cleans, it is spotless.”

Gus’s morning duty is to “go shopping” and buy any new things the truck needs for the day. He buys these items from an old friend who got Gus into the business and now runs the Mister Softee station. The station is made up of a few parking lots for the trucks and a store where drivers buy supplies. Gus buys a few boxes of chocolate and vanilla ice cream mix, which will later freeze up inside one of the truck’s machines. He also gets a can of whipped cream, some cups and strawberry syrup.

Lola has finished cleaning Gus’s truck. Containers of sprinkles are filled. Gallons of milk are placed in a refrigerator. Chocolate sauce is poured into a bowl. The truck is finally ready.

After unplugging the back of the truck from a wall outlet that is used to keep the refrigerators and freezers inside running overnight, Gus starts up the truck’s engine to warm it up. He drives out of the garage to sell ice cream in his own neighborhood, Astoria, New York. He’s lived here for over 40 years. Gus will spend between nine and ten hours driving around. He jumps from the driver’s seat to the serving window many times. This has started to hurt his body. “You’re walking on steel all day,” he says. “Talk to any Mister Softee driver and they’ll tell you that their legs from the knees down are a problem.”

There is an air conditioner in the truck. But it’s hard to cool the truck due to the heat coming from the refrigerators as well as the sweltering humidity of the summer air. The back of the truck is burning hot on days when temperatures climb above 95 degrees. These hot days are also some of the least profitable days because people stay inside their air-conditioned homes, so Gus doesn’t make much money. Of course, rainy days hurt business as well. How much money the drivers make changes from year to year, depending on the weather. Gus remembers one year when the weather was so nice for so long, he started driving in February and didn’t stop until Thanksgiving! “I made a lot of money that year,” he says.

Usually, Gus doesn't drive the truck for more than six months a year. Between April and October, he works every day it doesn't rain, unless there is an important family event or holiday. A day spent inside his home is a day he's not making money. So he'll try to work twelve hours in a day as often as he possibly can. On those days he misses his daughters.

For the winter, Gus tries to find a new job to make money for his family. "Once I drove a cab, but that was too much driving in one year for me," he laughs. "Usually, I work part-time in construction or at a restaurant just like when I was young." In some ways, he would love a stable, everyday job that is steady, he says. But with Mister Softee, he's his own boss. This has its advantages.

"I eat ice cream every day," Gus says. He admits that he eats his own ice cream, usually after accidentally making something a customer didn't ask for. "I feel like I have to eat the mistakes. I don't want them to go to waste!"

When he's had enough ice cream for the day, he gives his mistakes away, no charge. Gus loves giving away free ice cream, which has gotten him a lot of fans. However, the people of Astoria don't go to his truck just for ice cream. They also go to see their friend.

"My husband loves everyone," says Lola. "Adults, kids, pets. It doesn't matter."

The side windows of the truck have few stickers, making it easy to see into the back where Gus works. This was done on purpose. He feels it makes parents much more comfortable dealing with him because it shows he has nothing to hide. Gus doesn't drive late at night because he knows the truck's song will get kids to jump out of bed. During the daytime, he plays the song only once per block to limit the noise. Gus knows he should respect and get along with the people in his neighborhood because these people are the customers that make him money.

He calls the job "easy." Still, he must deal with the long hours away from his daughters, the heat, the pain in his legs, and the need to find a new job every winter. But Gus isn't going anywhere. This makes many people in his

neighborhood happy who see him daily during the summer. “Unless I hit the lotto,” he says, “which I don’t play, I’m not going to stop.”