

SBA Names Minnesota Small Business Person of the Year

SAINT CLOUD – Byron Bjorklund, owner of Custom Catering by Short Stop based in St. Cloud, Minn., has been named the Minnesota Small Business Person of the Year by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

The Small Business Person of the year is selected annually based on growth in sales or unit volume, increase in the number of employees, financial strength, innovativeness of product or service and evidence of contributions to community-oriented projects. Gail Ivers, Vice President



of the St. Cloud Area Chamber of Commerce, and Barry Kirchoff, Executive Director for the Small Business Development Center – St. Cloud State University, nominated Bjorklund for this award.

If you ask Byron Bjorklund what sets Custom Catering by Short Stop apart from the competition, he'll discuss customer service, creativity, and food presentation. If you talk with him for 15 minutes, you'll realize that Custom Catering by Short Stop actually has a secret weapon...and his name is Byron Bjorklund.

Fast talking, quick to smile, and charismatic, Byron brings the enthusiasm of an 11-year-old to his catering business. Maybe that's because he was 11-years-old when he fell in love with the restaurant business.

A finance major in college, Byron procrastinated on a class assignment until the last minute. Scrambling to write a paper on starting a business, he decided to focus on running a restaurant – something he understood from

working in the family restaurant since he was 11. He liked his business plan so well, he decided to give it a try. In 1984, while finishing his senior year in college and with a little help from his dad, he opened Short Stop in east St. Cloud.

Instead of dampening his enthusiasm, owning his own business ramped it up. Married in 1986, he opened a second Short Stop in west St. Cloud in 1987. His wife, PegAnne, ran the east side location and Byron ran the west location. But after four children the work was too much.

Knowing he needed to make a change, but wanting to stay in the food business, Byron started thinking about catering. For several years customers had requested that he provide chicken for

family and business functions, but he hadn't really considered that to be catering. As he started to research the idea he realized that there weren't many professional catering operations in the St. Cloud area. In 1995, he made the leap. He closed the east side location and focused on becoming a professional culinary caterer, not just a restaurant that delivered food. He joined catering trade associations, attended conventions, purchased hardware and equipment, and began changing his business model from Short Stop fast food to Short Stop Custom Catering. It turns out changing a business model is not as easy as it sounds. Byron kept the name Short Stop because people knew it so well and he didn't want to lose that. The problem was that people knew him as Short Stop Broasted Chicken and thought that's all he catered. To raise the Custom Catering profile, he created formal advertising materials to use when meeting with new clients and to promote the business.

A successful caterer has to do more than work at weddings. Byron discovered that exclusive relationships are the key to growing volume in the catering business. He's worked to develop those relationships and is now the exclusive caterer for several central Minnesota businesses including Wapicada Golf Course, Roadside Tavern, Powder Ridge, and the Red Carpet Events Center. He provides daily catering for four or five major employers in the St. Cloud area, setting up lunch and selling the food to employees for cash. He's also the second largest caterer for the St. Cloud Civic Center.

Byron offers his Short Stop Restaurant as a training site for students with special needs. He's been doing this for a number of years and likes to tell the story of Darrell who worked at the Short Stop restaurant for several years.

Darrell had Down syndrome and after he graduated from high school, his mother called and asked if it would be all right for her to bring Darrell to the store now and then because he like working there so much and he really missed it. Naturally, Byron said yes. Darrell died on Christmas Day and Byron offered to cater the funeral meal for free. As Byron recall, "Two years later, when Peg and I had our fifth child, Megan, we discovered she had Down syndrome. It was at that moment that I realized that Darrell had not only shown me how to be a better worker and corporate citizen, but he also had helped prepare me to be a better father to Megan."

It's obvious why the charity closest to Byron's heart is the Down Syndrome Association of Minnesota. In 1999, he offered to cater the Buddy Walk for the association. They served 400 meals. Today they feed over 5,000 people and Byron not only caters the event, he has recruited additional donors so the meal is free to participants. As he puts it, "I just feel good that I have the gifts that can be used to help people in the way and to help people feel special."

For more information:

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