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West Virginia Small Business “Cruisin’ Along” With Help From SBA

FAIRMONT - D.J.’s Diner located in Fairmont, WV, a family-owned restaurant specializing in classic American style food, is a classic example of how hard work can lead to success. It is also a good illustration of how the road to success is not without its ups and downs.

D.J.’s is owned and operated by the Rundle family, Donnie and Suzanne, along with their sons, D.J. and Erik. They work together to make the diner a unique experience for anyone who stops in. Donnie makes the sauces and specialties, including meatballs. Suzanne makes the desserts and D.J. handles the day-to-day management of the restaurant. Erik pitches in wherever needed.

“When we first opened in 1998, we worked at least 18 hours a day,” said D.J. “I personally worked over 100 straight days and a number of times brought a change of clothes with me.”

The Rundles came up with the concept of a 1950s and 60s style diner after years of research and community involvement. Donnie is a member of a local car club which holds “Cruise-ins,” a gathering where vintage car owners and enthusiasts meet to socialize and “show off” their cars.

“I was surprised at the number of people of all ages and walks of life interested in classic cars,” said D.J. “We noticed the “Cruise-ins” needed something extra, a place to get something to eat or drink and a place to sit and relax. The product is what you see today, D.J.’s Diner.”

They had a great location situated in a rapidly developing area of the state and near Interstate 79 already secured. To get the project rolling, they needed a little capital. Armed with a business plan, put together with the assistance from the local Small Business Development Center and Business Information Center, and the determination to make a success of their idea, the Rundles approached a local lending institution for funding. What resulted was a U.S. Small Business Administration 7(a) guaranty loan.

The SBA is a federal government agency that helps maintain and strengthen the nation’s economy by aiding, counseling, assisting and protecting the interests of small business and by helping families and businesses recover from national disasters. The 7(a) loan program, one of many program offered by SBA, is provided through lending institutions, called participants.

7(a) loans are only available on a guaranty basis, meaning they are provided by the participants who structure their own loans by SBA’s requirements and who apply for and receive a guaranty from SBA on a portion of the loan.

“We planned on constructing a facility from the ground up and were just about ready to start when we received a call from my Uncle in Maryland,” D.J. recalls. “He happened to drive by a 1950s style diner and thought it might be what we needed.”

His uncle was right. The diner was a custom pre-fabricated sectional building constructed by StarLight Diners which was trucked to their location and put together with two large cranes. It was definitely faster than building a facility.

“We had a huge grand opening featuring waiters and waitresses dressed in period clothing with several guest waiters from the community, including a few from SBA,” adds D.J. “Business was going great for a while, but once the novelty wore off business soon began to slow.”

But persistence, determination and the old American adage of hard work soon paid off for the Rundles. “We learned a lot about financing and how to run a business those first few years,” D.J. said. “When business began to slow and things weren’t looking good, we approached the local SCORE chapter and asked for assistance. The advice and guidance they provided made all the difference in the world.”

Business has picked up and the Rundles are enjoying a little success. “It’s like one huge family,” he said. “We have some customers we see sometimes three times a day since we offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus; and especially at our Friday night cruise-ins.”

When asked to provide some advice to those thinking about starting a business or just starting out, he doesn’t hesitate to inject, “Make sure you cover the bases before starting and learn all the aspects of running a business if you want to succeed, D.J. advised. “Put together a good management team and find good honest employees. And most importantly, if you need help somewhere along the line, swallow your pride and ask for it. SCORE and the SBDC counselors have a lot of knowledge and can provide a lot of assistance.”

SCORE and SBDC’s are valuable SBA resource partners who provide counseling services and management assistance, free of charge in most instances, to current and prospective small business owners.

For information on the SBA and the resources available to help small businesses, contact the West Virginia District Office at 800-767-8052 ext 8, by email at wvinfo@sba.gov, or visit them on the web at www.sba.gov/wv.

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