

Ice cream store owner scoops up fun

Entrepreneur mixes treat with a little entertainment

By Maureen Wallenfang

Post-Crescent staff writer

Ellen Brown answers her phone, "It's a great day for ice cream at Cold Stone. This is Ellen."

It's the way she answers every call, every day — even when it's 30 degrees below zero outside.

That kind of positive thinking and unflinching belief in her business has propelled this self-made woman from waitress years ago to entrepreneur.

Today, as managing partner in two Cold Stone Creamery franchises in Appleton and Grand Chute, Brown has a lot at stake, including startup costs of \$650,000.

It has been a wild ride.

"Opening two stores within three months of each other was quite an experience. It's like having twins," she said.

She and husband, Duane, opened their Fox River Mall store in August 2004, then quickly opened a second at 3420 E. Calumet St. in November 2004.

The Menasha native, 47, cut her teeth in the Bergstrom hotel and automotive empire, starting as a waitress in Christie's, an upscale restaurant in the Paper Valley Hotel that preceded Lombardi's Steakhouse. She worked her way up through the organization, later rising to manager of the Orchard Cafe and finally human resources manager for the automotive side of Bergstrom Corp.

She learned about handling employees and customers from Richard Bergstrom, considered one of the top customer service gurus in the Fox Valley.

Bergstrom, in turn, describes her as a "three-dimensional lady" who impressed him with her loyalty and commitment to job, church and family.

"I met Ellen Brown when we started the Paper Valley Hotel 25 years ago," said Bergstrom, president of Bergstrom Corp. "She has the old-fashioned work ethic. She worked her way up and became one of the leaders in the hospitality business. "



Ellen Brown is the local franchiser behind the two Cold Stone Creamery locations in the Appleton area. Brown is challenged with a crew of almost all part-time employees, age 15 to 18, serving premium ice cream in a quick-serve environment. The key to motivating teens, she said, is to treat them like young adults. Post-Crescent photo by Patrick Ferron.

Brown was with the Bergstrom organization until March 2004, and the Bergstroms wished her well as she moved on to pursue the dream of owning her own business.

"They were very helpful in securing our SBA loan," Brown said. "Dick wrote a very nice letter, a personal note. They're happy to see people be successful and go out on their own. I don't think I ever would have left Bergstrom's if it weren't to go out and do something like this for myself."

The years of Bergstrom-style perfection also were crucial in shaping the way she did business. "It was beneficial for me to start in that type of environment," said Brown. "I have an attention to detail. You pay attention to customers' little individual needs."

Her work at Cold Stone, she said, is closely related to what she did at Bergstrom. "The core values are being the best we can be and having a passion for taking care of people."

Here, Brown has a different set of challenges with a crew of almost all part-time employees, age 15 to 18, serving premium ice cream in a quick-serve environment.

"I've got 40 kids," she said. "They're the same ages as my kids. That's going to keep me young for a long time."

And like parents who feel the pain of an empty nest, she said the hardest part is seeing employees leave for college. The last of her original crew go on to college this year.

The key to motivating teens, she said, is to treat them like young adults. "A lot of people won't give high school students responsibility," she said. "I give them direction and let them take it."

American Idol

It's Saturday afternoon at the Fox River Mall, and Brown is holding interviews for new employees in one of the mall's vacant storefronts.

The interviews have a slight resemblance to an "American Idol" audition, with job applicants singing, dancing and talking in front of the group. They showed they were not embarrassed to be the center of attention, whether it was doing the chicken dance, the Macarena, a break dance or a school cheer. She'll eventually hire eight of the 21 hopefuls.

Employees are expected to engage customers as they blend ice cream with ingredients like caramel, fudge, fresh fruit or roasted almonds on a frozen granite slab to create desserts like Caramel Turtle Temptation or Strawberry Shortcake Serenade. Brown takes the entertainment aspect of the business to heart, and future employees must show they have the spunk before they can sling ice cream.

"If you can put a smile on their faces before they leave, they'll be back," said Duane Brown, DJ for the day.

Ger Thao, 15, an applicant who attends the Renaissance School for the Fine Arts in Appleton, dropped to the floor to do a break dance. "It's a fun place to work," he said on why he applied here. "The more we entertain, the more we draw customers into the store," said Ellen Brown. "I'm looking for the kid with something extra. We're looking for leaders."

Justen Geiger, 18, also of Appleton, has worked at Cold Stone since August and was on hand to help Brown judge applicants. She's the reason he applied for the job seven months ago. "I had been looking for a job. My dad recognized her and said, "You should work for her. She was a great boss."

Geiger's dad, Jeffrey, had worked for Brown as a bus boy at the Orchard when he was a teenager.

"I enjoy working for her," Justen Geiger said. "She's flexible. She's organized so everything flows smoothly."

Brown knows employees take her lead, so being many employees' "first boss" is something she takes seriously. "It's important for my crew to see my dedication and how important this is to me personally. They know I won't make them do anything I wouldn't do myself."

Between the two stores, Brown typically works a seven-day week. She'll take time off, mostly when she's forced to, though she doesn't like to boast about it.

"This is my life. This is part of who I am," she said.

Business challenges

The ice cream market, described as a mature industry by some analysts, doesn't have a lot of elbow room. Increased competition from all sides, including other premium rivals like Maggie Moo's, and overall challengers that range from Baskin-Robbins and Culver's to Dairy Queen and grocery store brands.

Brown's fortunes are right in line with her fellow Cold Stone franchisees.

Corporate wide, average Cold Stone store sales were down about 5 percent this past year, from \$380,000 to about \$360,000 per store, as the company expanded rapidly.

"The numbers going down are based on the fact that there are more stores to go to. My numbers might have been down, but Manitowoc opened, Sheboygan opened. Two or three more opened," Brown said.

"Same store sales are coming back up again," she said.

While part of it is the Starbucks trend — consumers are willing to pay more for a premium product — it's also a positive indicator for the economy.

Her own business plan figured she'd become profitable in the three- to five-year range, and she said it's on target. "We're working on labor and food costs," she said. "It takes time to learn a business." For Brown, the focus on entertainment is what gives her the ultimate edge.

"We're trying to make it an experience by the singing and the mixing on the stone in front of people," she said.

"The Brewery Collectibles store opened across the hall from us last weekend and (the owner) came up to me on Sunday and said, 'What's with all the singing?' I said, 'Hey we just like to have fun.'

"He said, 'I can't believe all the people coming into your store. And then they came to my store too, so that's even better.' So they started singing along with us."