

Joining Forces

Two prominent South Sound caterers team up at Snuffin's

Sharon Snuffin and Marnie Hayes continue to strive to make their names synonymous with South Sound catering. But after building their individual reputations, these two catering powerhouses are hoping to be known for the work they do together at Snuffin's Catering in Gig Harbor.

"It's going to be a nice merge," Hayes said, adding that while both have been working in the South Sound, they have different contacts and perspectives to bring to the table. "Together we are going to make this happen."

Snuffin has owned Snuffin's since 1974 and recently decided it was time to enact a succession plan. However, she made it clear that she is not leaving the company.

"I've been working toward a succession plan, but you have to have the right people," Snuffin said. "My existing staff likes what they are doing, but don't want to be the leader."

To even take a couple days off a week, Snuffin said she needed to find someone trustworthy with catering leadership experience. She said Hayes fits this description, but it took fate to open her eyes to the partnership.

Hayes, who has been with The Vault Catering Co. for 15 years, recently parted ways with her business partner Jon Tartaglia. While she described leaving the company she helped start as "traumatic," Jackson said she's ready to take a positive step forward.

And when Snuffin found out Hayes was no longer with The Vault, she said a light bulb went on. "It was serendipity," she said. "Truly the timing was amazing."

And, because she has known Hayes for the last 15 years, Snuffin said she didn't have to worry about her talents.

"It's important that you work with people you like," Snuffin said. "It's like a marriage."

After hearing what her long-time friend wanted, Hayes agreed to this "marriage" and joined the team at Snuffin's.

"As we move forward, (Hayes) will help grow our business," Snuffin said. "It just feels right."

Succession plan

Snuffin admits part of her business' success came from the fact that she is "crazy" enough to put in a lot of hard work.

"You have to love this business and I do," she said. "I was blessed with great genes and an enormous amount of energy."

But while she continues to love her work, she also has found a passion for community service and wants more time to devote to those types of projects.

"I've been working seven days a week for a long

time. As a small business owner you do whatever you can," said Snuffin, who is 68. "It's not so much I'm giving anything up for the business. It's moving forward, while still allowing myself to have more time for me and the community."

Anthony Anton, Washington Restaurant Association president and CEO, said retirement planning is a common problem for both restaurant and catering owners.

He said beyond closing the business, an owner is left with only a couple of options: selling the company or creating a succession plan.

"The nice thing about bringing someone in is you live with that," Anton said. "You can't really fake work ethic. You can see if there is a similar view of what success is or how to reach it. It allows the business visions to align."

While Snuffin has no plans to leave the business anytime soon, she said that to even take a small step back required finding someone talented and trustworthy. And she believes Hayes has both of these traits.

Anton also recommends that business owners considering a succession plan keep an eye out for red flags such as someone that comes and goes quickly between jobs.

History

When Hayes helped start The Vault, the caterer she and her business partner consulted was Snuffin's Catering.

During that time, Snuffin told Hayes that at some point she would become a caterer herself. Snuffin also introduced Hayes to Michael Roman, president of Catersource.

Since they share Roman as a mentor and have a history together, both women say they have a common language they can use when discussing the business.

"I've always valued (Hayes') friendship," Snuffin said. "She's a straight-shooter."

Snuffin added that even though the two worked at different catering companies for the last decade, neither considered themselves competitors.

In fact, Hayes said when she was dealing with the dilemma of what to do with her career, Snuffin was one of the first people she called for guidance.

Hayes said when she first heard Snuffin's succession plan, she thought, "No thanks. I'll do a start-up."

But after thinking about the opportunity, she realized what a great fit it was. While Hayes was approached by various start-ups to take over the catering



portion of the business, she felt Snuffin's was a better fit for her.

"At my age, I don't want to start new ventures," she said.

Anton said known quantities usually do have opportunities even in a challenging economy.

"As tough as it is out there – and it is tough – people that establish themselves well and have established a reputation there is a demand," he said.

Established business

When Snuffin started her business 37 years ago, she knew she wanted to be different from the competition and a large part of that would be the quality of the products she offered.

Hayes said she's still impressed with the inventory Snuffin's has. Potential clients can choose not only what type of menu they want, but also the type of dinnerware and related pieces they want to use.

"We want it to be one-stop," Snuffin said.

When the business first began, it had a 450-square-foot kitchen. Now Snuffin owns a building in Gig Harbor and has 9,500 square feet for her business.

The business has between 80 and 100 employees on its payroll, but most of those are on-call and include a lot of local high school and college students.

Hayes said one of the most important factors for her in deciding Snuffin's was a good fit was the way Snuffin treats her employees. In fact, Hayes said she was impressed that Snuffin gave her daily employees a free lunch so they could spend time catching up on work and life.

Since some of her former employees no longer work at The Vault, Hayes plans to consider offering them work at Snuffin's.

Snuffin's targets both personal events, like weddings, and corporate events. However, during the recession, the corporate side of the business fell off slightly.

Hayes said she's hoping to use her corporate contacts in Tacoma to grow that side of Snuffin's business.

"We are both moving forward," Snuffin said.

Writer Breanne Coats can be reached at bcoats@BusinessExaminer.com.