

Age Is No Challenge To Owners Of True Blue Coffee Roasters

A large yellow coffee roaster hummed while she checked the temperature of the gourmet beans roasting inside. "Almost there, but not quite yet", she said to me as I sat looking puzzled at the machine. "After a year of this you would think I would be tired of it, but I'm not, I absolutely love it", she continued.

She is Linda Keller, co-owner of True Blue Coffee Roasters located in Old Fields, West Virginia. At an age when most people are looking forward to retirement, this sixty three year old girl is just getting her next wind. She buzzes around the room with the energy of a person half her age. When she sits down for a moment, I seize my chance to ask her a question.

My question seems to stun her for a second. "At your age, what made you decide to try and open a gourmet coffee business?" She hesitates for a second and replies, "At your age? You should never begin a question for a lady with 'at your age?...'" She smiles and I realize she isn't angry. After a brief pause she continues, "For twenty five years I worked at my fathers garage and service station. When we closed it, I quickly came to the conclusion that I wasn't going to sit at home waiting for the dust to collect. I knew I wanted to do something, I just didn't know exactly what. When Rick asked me about joining him in opening an Organic Fair Trade coffee roasting business, I jumped at the chance."

Rick would be Rick Smith. He is her brother and another co-owner of True Blue Coffee Roasters. When I pose the same question to him, he is more succinct in his answer. "I fail to see how age enters into the equation." I wait for him to expound, but he just sits there smiling. He lifts his coffee cup to his mouth and takes a big swallow. "Ah, this is what it is all about", he sighs gently. I've learned that to be successful, you need to do what you love, and do it better than anyone else. I love coffee, so it seemed a natural fit for me to open a coffee roasting business."

There is a knock at the door and Rick excuses himself for a moment. When he returns, he is accompanied by a small unassuming woman, who greets me with a smile. "This is Betsy O'Neal, she is our other business partner", he explains. She quickly fixes herself a cup of coffee and joins our discussion.

"Rick took me with him to a CoffeeFest convention in DC", she says. "After looking and seeing all that was available, and what we could do, I was hooked."

"Actually, it was Betsy and Rob (Rick's partner) that came up with the idea to roast and sell coffee", Rick interjects. "I had bought a small home roaster that only roasted two ounces of beans at a time. They wanted to roast coffee and sell it locally as a small side job. After some research, we realized there wasn't any reason to do it small. There are a lot of roasters out there, but very few that are committed to Organic Fair Trade coffees."

"Is that what makes your company different from other roasters?" I ask him. "One of the things, yes", he replies. "We only roast and sell Organic and Fair Trade Coffees. The benefits of organic foods are well known, but not a lot of people understand the concept of Fair Trade. We took on the mission of also educating consumers about the benefits of Fair Trade."

Asked to explain some of those benefits, he continues. "First and foremost, FairTrade coffees guarantee a fair price for the small coffee farmers around the world. Some of the smaller farms have some of the most outstanding coffee you will drink. Without the aid of Fair Trade practices, they would be unable to compete with the larger coffee plantations and get those coffees to market. Secondly, Fair Trade practices lend to sustainable agriculture. When the farmers are able to sustain their crops year after year, the consumer is guaranteed consistently great coffee. It might cost a little more for us to buy our green coffee beans from Fair Trade farms and co-ops, but we know the benefits for the farmers, and the consumers, make it worthwhile."

I ask them if there is anything that sets them apart from their competition. "Oh yes", Linda answers. "We also wanted to show that a business can be run with great ethics and practices, and still be successful. We are completely open and honest with our clients and customers. All of us believe that honesty is the only way to go."

Rick refreshes everyone's coffee and we move outside to a deck. I am awestruck by the view around us. Mountains reach into the sky and fields seem to flow on for miles. "This view is what inspired our Mountain Morning Breakfast Blend", he explains. "The sun peeking over those mountains in the morning, and then setting on that range over there in the evening is just magical and inspirational."

"Tell me about the name", I inquire. "How did you come up with 'True Blue Coffee Roasters'?"

"That was a group effort", Betsy explains. "We threw around a lot of suggestions. Finally, we decided we should call ourselves what we were. We all think of ourselves as True Blue Americans. We are all patriotic and love our country. With everything that is going on now, we wanted to show pride in being American. In fact, that is why we recently donated and shipped our gourmet coffee to the troops in Afghanistan. True Blue Americans take care of other True Blue Americans."

Outside of the gourmet coffee business all three like to remain busy. Betsy, who is 65, is in the middle of her certification to become a clinical psychologist. Rick, at 53, is the Executive Director of a multi-county social services agency. An aspiring artist, Linda likes to keep busy painting and taking care of her grandchildren.

"The grandchildren are the hope of the future", Linda says. "I love having them for the weekend. It gives my husband and myself time to bond with them, and maybe even hand a little wisdom down to them."

"Other than work, what do you like to do for fun?" I question them.

Betsy looks diminutively over her coffee cup and replies, I'm an artist as well. My passion lies in stained glass, though. I like to paint too, but my real passion is stained glass."

Rick sighs out loud. "What does that mean?" I ask him.

"It means that between my job and the coffee business I don't exactly have a lot of down time. But when I do, I like to read. Nothing to me is better than a good book. Reading keeps your mind sharp, and it takes you away to all kind of fantastical places", he explains.

Finally I ask them what advice they would give to people reading this article. They sit silent for a moment, as if pondering some profound philosophical answer. They look at each other, each waiting for the other to speak. Finally, Linda breaks the silence. "Fear is the great crippler. Don't let fear stand in your way of achieving anything you wish for. Starting this business was frightening. It was new and we had so much to learn. I was scared, but I was even more excited. When you really want something, don't let fear stop you."

"In life, you take a lot of wrong turns. Don't get upset about it. Learn to revel in the things you didn't expect. Learn from it, and then get back on track", Betsy adds.

Spending an afternoon with these three has had more of an effect on me than I would have imagined when I first got here. That evening driving home, the air seemed clearer, the evening sun a bit brighter, and this middle-aged man felt young again. Rick, Betsy, and Linda: three people out to change the world, with their exuberance and passion on display, I think they just might do it.

True Blue Coffee Roasters can be found on the web at <http://www.trueblueroasters.com>

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