Forsythe Entrepreneurial Center

Founder Stories: Manager of Southern Food Service

Presented by Paul Earle

Paul Earle: Hi, I'm Paul Earl, principal of Earl and Company and a faculty member at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Welcome to season one of Founder's Stories produced by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The mission of Founders Stories is to provide you, the listener, with a deeper understanding of entrepreneurship, engage and entertain you along the way for sure and perhaps even inspire you to become an entrepreneur yourself. We have a fantastic guest for this episode, a visually impaired entrepreneur who has built a wonderful enterprise in the food business. I'm inspired and my guess is that you will be too.

Pam Schnurr: My name is Pam Schnurr and I am a contract manager with Southern Food Service and I run a cafeteria or C-store coffee shop and the vending in a federal building.

Paul Earle: Pam tells us her story from the beginning.

Pam Schnurr: I was actually married for 14 years and my ex husband decided it was time to go on and so he left me with two young kids and I had never worked outside my home other than volunteering. I actually started going back to school to be a social worker and I was working part time for a blind vendor and he said, "Pam, this is a really good time to get into the vending program because they're opening new locations." And he talked me into trying it because I'd been helping him run his business. He said I was good at it and he said, "Go to Chicago." So I went to the training and left my two little girls and went to the training in Chicago for six months.

Pam Schnurr: It was really a tough training class but it was great. I came home, I got the weekend off and they put me to work on Monday morning in the main post office downtown Indianapolis and I started out with, I think, eight machines in the truck terminal. I really did enjoy it. I love dealing with the customers. At one point we had five vendors in that building and so then more of the people were leaving the building and so once one of our vendors would move on, they would take that location and give it to someone else. So by the end of the 25 years I was there, I ended up having the whole post office, which I had about 60 machines in there.

Paul Earle: And she was just getting started, really.

Pam Schnurr: And then I bid on this location that I have now and it's a lot different. I do a lot of the administrative work now. I do payroll, the invoices, to inventories and a lot of the paperwork, do payroll and like I said, a lot of administration, hiring and that kind of thing. While I have 25 employees now and I run a coffee shop, which we probably serves Starbucks and we do a C-store, which is like a small snack bar. We serve coffee, popcorn, soda, that kind of thing, candy bars and chips. And then we also have a full cafeteria. In the cafeteria, we have a regular hotline. We have a show place, which is where we make salads or potato bar or taco bar in front of the customer and they get to tell you what they want on everything. We have a grill and we serve breakfast and lunch and we serve probably between 15 to 1800 people a day.

Paul Earle: I profile a lot of businesses and I can tell you this is impressive. Period. Visually impaired or not. 25 employees is a lot. And that's a sizeable volume of service too. Pam continued on. I asked her, "Were you always an entrepreneur?"

Pam Schnurr: Absolutely not. I was content to be home and I mean I did like volunteer work at Shepherds Beffle mission. I did raise two little girls. So that was never something I thought I would be capable of doing. And when I went and went through the school and now I love it. I don't even know how I did without it. So yeah, it's been a big transition, but I really enjoy it. It's a great place to be. I would encourage anybody that even thinks about going into a business, I mean, I know a lot of businesses fail, but it's what you put into it, how much time and effort you put into it and that's going to make your business happen.

Paul Earle: There's a key lesson here. Sometimes what you think is failure is actually just a bump in the road, a perfectly normal obstacle that all entrepreneurs encounter and overcome.

Pam Schnurr: I mean that's really how you learn was through your failures. So don't give up, just keep going and you'll get there. I just really encourage people to try to go. I have a lot of friends that are blind that I try to encourage them to go into the vending program and I encourage them to go through Hadley because they have such great courses. I took all their courses for the vending program. I took the business mall was really good because I didn't know a whole lot about business mall and with this job I have now, I really needed that. So I was really happy that Hadley was there for me and I was able to go back and get the training I needed through them.

Paul Earle: Pam and I spent some time talking about the unique challenges to being an entrepreneur who is visually impaired. Entrepreneurship is hard enough for sighted people.

Pam Schnurr: Well, as a blind person, I do use a cane. I use dolls on my computer. I do a lot of trying to figure out ways to make things work for me. I'm trying to come up with ways that I will be able to hope to be able to use the equipment or a lot of times I use magnifying glasses for things. A lot of things with machines, it's really not so hard that if you are visually impaired because you need to be able to get in there with your hands and actually do things by feel. So it really worked out okay. But some of the other jobs that are really challenging are just being able to read dates on products and that kind of thing is tough. Now that I have so many employees, that really does help. I don't have to do so much of that keeping track of all the dates and everything, but it's been a challenge. I mean, there's no doubt about that. A lot of it is not the fact that I can't do it. A lot of times it's just the public's opinion of when they see a person with a cane, they're not real sure that they could do anything, let alone run a business. So a lot of times customers will try to talk to my staff instead of me. But it's been a definite challenge to do. But I mean it's great rewards.

Paul Earle: Entrepreneurship is a roller coaster ride for sure. And Pam talked about how she handles it.

Pam Schnurr: Well, my husband probably is the one person who's been able to help me there. He's my backbone. He's always there for me. He helps me a lot. But I'm pretty stubborn person and that sometimes helps me. I had my mind made up that I was going to do this and that's part of it. Just making up your mind to make sure you are really sincere and really want to do it. Just making sure that you can, I know I can. A lot of times the hardest struggle is showing other people that I can. Some of the high points I've been... When I left a little bit of the post office for a while they thought I was leaving this one section I did and these guys all there threw me a going away party.

Pam Schnurr: But then it ended up, I stayed in the post office and took another location and I actually got that one back so it was fine. But some of the other things I really was, I would say, scared to death to take this job because it's so different. I run my own business and I was really excited about doing it but it was such a different challenge for me. But the first year I was here, I talked to my, he was the guy that runs Southern, his name's Michael. I asked him if he would come to our convention or conference and talk to us about teaming partners and what kind of a vendor would you like to have? And he said, "I would just tell them Pam Schnurr because you've done a great job." And I got a team in and I learned what was going on first, probably the first year, the second year I actually was able to go in and get us better pricing on things and signed up for a buying group and reduced a lot of labor and really improved our sales. So that was probably my high point.

Paul Earle: Pam has some guidance for those of you listening who may be thinking about entrepreneurship but you haven't taken the plunge just yet.

Pam Schnurr: My advice would be to do your homework, know your people that are going to be there, know how many people are going to be in your location, if you can. I know some of it, it's open to the public then that's a whole different thing. But if you're in an enclosed building then you know kind of how many customers you're going to have. And do your homework, do the background, see what this location has done before and just make sure you have everything in order before you go in. Make sure you know that every bit of the money you make is not yours. Do your homework as far as taxes in your state and make sure you know what you're doing.

Paul Earle: Pam talked about the importance of mentorship. Entrepreneurship can be lonely, but also people in the community tend to want to help each other. Don't be shy.

Pam Schnurr: Go find someone that's been in it. Do a lot of networking with other people that are run businesses. Do as much as you can before. Come up with a great business plan. Those all help you get a good start and so that's pretty much my advice, is to really try to do a lot as much homework as you can before you go into it. And once you're there, then it's a lot of work and it's a lot of time and hopefully you're committed to do that because that's what it's going to take at first, especially. You are kind of lonely at the top. When you run your own business, you have employees, but you can't really be friends with them because you have to be their boss. It is a little lonely sometimes, but the best thing that I have found, find other people that are in the same type of business that I'm in or different organizations that will help and that's really been there for me and my family, of course.

Pam Schnurr: So that's kind of what I do. I do see how people could be lonely. It is harder. It's not like you're one of the people because you feel, even though you're the head of it, you can't be one of them because then you lose track of they tried to take advantage in a way. I mean it's just human nature. It's not like they're trying to do that. It's just if they feel like you're their friend, then they can try to get away with stuff. So it is kind of lonely sometimes, but I still enjoy it.

Paul Earle: Life is a journey and Pam reflected back on her own origin story.

Pam Schnurr: I actually wanted to be a social worker because I wanted to help people. Since I become an entrepreneur, I've got to help a lot more people by doing... I'm all about helping people with disabilities. I have hired two people that are legally blind, at our work. And I've also been able to use my time and money to help other blind people in different organizations. And I've been able to reach out and help blind kids coming up into this program called The Step Program. And it's, it's for employment. So they come to my location for about a month during the summer and they get to find out what it's like to work and maybe, possibly, get into the vending program themselves and learn how to run a business of their own and be an entrepreneur just like I am. I got to be my social worker and run my own business. I got the best of both worlds. I'm pretty happy with what I've done.

Paul Earle: The other day I was having breakfast with a business partner and he talked about a twist to the notion of a "go getter". It's called a go giver. And it gets to the idea of service leadership, a real commitment to making things better for others. Pam has that character trait in abundance.

Pam Schnurr: I like being able to help people. I've been able to do both and that's really made my life worthwhile to me. That's kind of my story.

Paul Earle: So there you have it. A veritable case study in persistence, seizing opportunity, and overcoming obstacles and the benefits of simply trying to do good by others. I hope you enjoyed the tale. I know I did. So long for now.