

OUT OF A JAM AND INTO JELLY

Turning an old family recipe into jobs

by Will Mingus, PhD

CAROLYN HERBERT WANTED to do something that would make a difference in people's lives. She learned from a relative just how difficult it is for people on public registries to find meaningful employment. As a former educator, she wanted desperately to help people in that situation find their way back to happiness. She finally figured out a way she could help: she decided to make jelly. Wine jelly, to be specific.

"My husband and I don't take anything from the company. We're both retired and this is more of a mission for us. We figure we can live on our retirement. Everything from the business goes right back into the business. All profits are split among the employees."

In addition to providing jobs, she puts away some of the money for people who are incarcerated so that they will have some cash to get them started after they are released. One individual who is scheduled to be released this year helped the business by coming up with a new product idea.

"I'm so excited for him. We had the wine jelly, but he came up with peanut butter products, and he will get one hundred percent of those profits. Now he has something to look forward to—an envelope of money because he came up with the idea and he gets the profits from each jar."

"This is more than just providing employment opportunities to people. It is about accepting people for who they are and helping them feel useful and wanted."

The company is called Herbert's Wine Jelly. Carolyn and her team make all their products themselves and sell them through a variety of venues, including grocery stores and craft shows. You can also buy them online through their website or through Amazon.com. Being able to sell food products commercially required Carolyn to attain certification from the ABC (Alcoholic Beverage Control), FDA, and USDA. It was a lot of work, but she says it was worth it.

"I wanted to do everything I possibly could to be fully certified. We did all of the things that are safety oriented. I have a professional chef on staff so we have the culinary certification as well as the safety certifications. And with that, I can sell anywhere in the US."

Local and well-known wines are used in the making of all wine products. The alcohol is first removed from the wine while retaining the flavor. This is the key to Herbert's Jelly.

"We were taking care of my ninety-six-year-old mother and she loved wine, and so I started making wine jelly," Carolyn told me. "Since we do have a family member who is currently incarcerated, we started selling the jelly and I started putting the money aside as for him. I just went from there."

Although they are both retired, Carolyn and her husband turned their jelly-making hobby into a business that provides money and employment opportunities for people who are on a public registry. She and her husband are fortunate to have their retirement income to live on, so they don't need the income that the business provides.

Carolyn and her husband employ more than ten people who are on a public registry. She explains that she mixed two ideas into one business. She enjoys making her homemade jellies and she wants to help people succeed, despite the burden of the registry.

“There were kids I knew that are on the registry and I wanted to help them, but I didn’t know what to do. My feeling is I already have the red dot on my business, so come one, come all. What do I care how many red-dots are under my umbrella? I’m not ashamed to tell people that. My neighborhood, my county, everyone is very much in favor of this.”



Carolyn demonstrates what to look for in the stirring process.

Since it began, Herbert’s Wine Jelly has expanded to include other products. In addition to the wine jellies for which they are so well-known, they also make herb dips, peanut butter, hot cocoa, and even candy. Each product line that they add allows them to hire more people.

“We now have ten employees and we’re still working out at the farm. Our kitchen is approved and large enough for now. However, the more we expand, the more people we can help.”

Her idea has been so successful that she was able to offer a licensing opportunity to someone in Texas who also wanted to help people with convictions in their background. They hope to open other branches in the Midwest.

To Carolyn, this is more than just providing employment opportunities to people. It is about accepting people for who they are and helping them feel useful and wanted.

“It’s not just about making jelly. It’s about sitting around together, putting boxes together, and doing stuff together. My grandson will come in the middle of something and he’ll say, ‘Who wants to play a game of air hockey? I’m challenging somebody to air hockey.’ That’s fine. That’s important because that’s what you do. Sometimes you take a break. Everybody needs the ability to feel whole again and have self-respect and people to trust you and all. That’s where we are, and we do it for each other.”

for each other.”

Carolyn and her husband are constantly thinking of new ways they can help people get back on their feet. They have started a nonprofit organization called “New Day, New Life” designed to help people coming out of the criminal justice system find meaningful employment. They hope to connect people with existing jobs as a specialized employment agency. They also want to provide a venue where people can offer their crafts up for sale.

“The nonprofit is to help people, especially people on the registry, either get a job or do some part-time work. If they’re crafts-oriented, we can help sell their products through a new website and at craft shows. Just help them to earn an income. That is our goal, to help them earn something. Even if it isn’t enough to pay for a house, at least they’re going to have something for their work.”

Through the nonprofit, Carolyn is hoping to raise money for a larger kitchen so they can hire even more people. She is always talking to others about how they can work together to make this endeavor more successful. She doesn’t shy away from telling people about her business nor about the people she employs.

“I am living in a community where our neighbors now understand the registry. We have worked hard to provide correct information to everyone in our community regarding the registry. Even our sheriff said he would rather have a person on the registry living here who’s employed, not on welfare, not on any kind of general assistance. Let them get back to their life.” ■



Small batch jellies are a must in making the best jelly possible. Once the final processing step is completed, they are cooled and ready for labeling.

You can find Herbert’s Wine Jelly products on their website, www.herbertswinejelly.com, on Amazon.com, or in local grocery stores across the country. If you would like to talk to Carolyn about starting a licensed company, you can reach her at herbertswinejelly@gmail.com.