

Bushel Basket Candle Company

“\$30,128!”

The fundraiser at Lincoln-Jefferson Elementary School had just finished, and the two women who coordinated the event were tallying up the results. Jackie received the first email at 6:20pm: \$12,000 in orders! She ran to the foot of the stairs and shouted up to Les, who was reading a story to their four-year-old daughter. The women kept counting, and, twenty minutes later, another email arrived: \$18,000! Jackie started checking email every fifteen minutes. The messages kept coming, and by 8:30 they had the grand total: \$30,128!

The fundraiser was successful beyond anyone’s expectations, and now Jackie and Les were star struck by the success but were also wondering, *How are we going to make all of these candles to fill this order?*

Les and Jackie Payne started selling and, eventually, making candles back in 2001 as a way for Jackie to be able to make some money while staying at home with their newborn daughter. Bushel Basket Candle Company evolved out of Jackie’s EBay selling experience. She began working at home by selling on EBay and very quickly realized that there is a market “even for a half empty package of baby diapers.”

“You wouldn’t believe what people will pay for a package of diapers,” she said incredulously, “plus shipping!” She scoured the house and began selling everything that wasn’t nailed down and, when that supply ran out, hit garage sales so she could resell her purchases. That’s when a friend told Les and Jackie that they should start selling candles.

“Candles?” they said looking at each other. “We don’t know the first thing about candles!” It didn’t take Jackie long to find out everything she could about candles and how to take them to market. She’s a big proponent of research and approaches every decision armed with as much information as she can gather. “We found out very quickly that there was a big market for candles and, more importantly, people were willing to spend what we thought was a lot of money for them.”

So, on April 1, 2001, they got their business license and Bushel Basket Candle Company was born. They found some candle wholesalers and began reselling candles from their kitchen. Operations quickly spread to the basement, then the back porch, and, finally, the garage. Les, who also holds down a job as an LTL truck driver, realized they had to find workspace outside their house one morning when he couldn’t find enough counter space to make his lunch.

“Our mailman told us he could smell the candles two blocks away, and the only complaint from their neighbors was *after* Bushel Basket moved operations to the Sterling Small Business & Technology Incubator and the aroma moved with it,” Les said, “they started smelling their dogs again!”

“It was a big deal to move the company out of the house,” Les said. They had considered adding on to their home in order to accommodate the business, but at the last minute, their builder backed out of the deal. “One of the basic things we believe in is that when something happens, it’s usually for a reason,” Jackie said.

“When the builder backed out, we decided that it would be better to move the business out of the house.” This was in 2005, and, by that time, the Paynes had been manufacturing candles themselves for about four years.

Everyone knows what a candle is, but, like everything, candles are not as simple as they appear. “A candle is composed of wax, oil (the scent that gives the candle its aroma), the wick and the container. The ratio of wax and oil has to be correct or else the candle won’t burn properly. The wick has to be the correct size and style for the particular candle. “When we first started making our own candles, all of the research showed that, in order to make a cleaner burning candle, you should add food shortening to the wax,” Jackie explained.

“The only problem with that,” Les interrupted, “is that the candle burns more!” They laughed as they recalled a story from some candles they bought from a wholesaler in Tennessee. “The candles didn’t have the proper mix of wax, oil and food shortening in them so when you lit the wick, the whole top of the candle lit up. The entire top was on fire!” Thankfully, the wholesaler took the entire shipment back without any questions.

By this time, the Paynes were working with lots of schools, churches, Boy Scout troops, just about any group that wanted to hold a fundraiser. One of the very first groups that they worked with was a Boy Scout troop who held a fundraiser to make money to go to camp. The orders totaled \$2,000 and when Jackie got the check for \$1,000 (they split 50/50 on fundraisers), she just held it in her hands and thought, “Wow, we can really do this! We can make this work!”

“When we hear about all of the things that organizations are able to purchase through their fundraisers, it makes us feel proud,” Jackie said. “A school in Topeka, Kansas, bought a bunch of equipment for their students with disabilities. A church raised money to send kids on a mission trip to Louisiana to help clean up after Hurricane Katrina. One girl held her own personal fundraiser to pay to go to acting camp out east. We’re a part of all of this but we could *never* pay for these things on our own. It gives us a great feeling to know we were able to help.”

The Paynes always move cautiously when making business decisions and definitely focus on long term results instead of the daily hurdles and problems that arise with any business. Jackie is responsible for the lion's share of the operations, and, like any small business owner, she has to wear a lot of hats: manufacturer, marketer, manager. They are continually faced with rising material costs. "You have to remember that wax is a petroleum-based product, and, as goes the price at the pump, so go our prices for wax." They bought more than 15,000 pounds of wax last year, and, when you realize that the cost of oil keeps reaching new levels, they are looking for ways to keep a lid on costs. "We've reached the next level with manufacturing, where we are trying to work with our suppliers to lock in a price and purchase in big quantities," Jackie said.

Les is the quiet, steady sounding board off whom Jackie constantly bounces ideas. "The most important factor in the making or breaking of a small start-up business is 100 percent support from your spouse," Jackie said. "Without that support, I don't see how any business can succeed."

Always keeping an eye on the bottom line, both Les and Jackie look for ways to streamline operations without sacrificing the quality of the finished product. "We stand behind every candle we make and will refund or replace any order if the customer isn't totally happy," Jackie said. "We even got a call from a lady who had bought one of our candles at a fundraiser and forgot about it in a closet. Three years later, she finally wanted to burn it, but didn't like the scent and wanted to replace it with another."

Candle making is very much a roll-up-the-sleeves, hands-on business. During the production process, the very first step is to melt the wax prior to adding the fragrant oil. Most candle makers rely on a melting pot which can run upwards of \$1,000. Les looked at the situation and retrofitted 60-quart stock pots with drum warmers wrapped around them and—presto—a wax melting pot for about \$100. The Paynes have eight such pots on electronic timers so the wax (which takes about three hours to melt) is ready and waiting at the start of the business day. "Jackie likes to call me Mr. Timer because I've got everything wired to timers. Unfortunately, if the power goes out, it can really ruin the schedule for the day!"

The Paynes occasionally use part-time workers, but—the lament of employers the world over—good help is hard to find. They also rely on Self Help Enterprises in Sterling, a local company with developmentally-challenged workers. "Self Help is great, we really rely on them, they work very hard and it's great when their workers receive their paychecks. They're so proud and so happy!" Jackie said laughing. "Les was at Self Help picking up an order when they got paid and one of the workers wanted to take him out for lunch!"

In 2006, the Paynes received a \$10,000 *Challenge Grant* from the State of Illinois. Half of the funds were designated for advertising in order to expand their reach with fundraiser programs to surrounding states. The other half was

designated for expanding Bushel Basket's wholesale program which has subsequently been growing "by leaps and bounds." We now ship wholesale as far away as Pennsylvania and Texas, with 63 wholesale customers on the books."

So how does everything get done? "We've had our share of working until one or two in the morning," Jackie said, "but I'm not one of those people that can survive on three hours of sleep—I need at least eight hours." In addition to working with organizations doing fundraisers, the Paynes have also hired outside consultants who bring in orders through parties and other get-togethers. But, like so many variables in the life of an entrepreneur, some consultants have been successful, while others haven't.

Jackie, as always, is researching to find new ways to market their candles and has recently been working with Michele Miller, Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Director at Sauk Valley Community College to uncover better ways to operate the business. "We've been working with Michele over the past six months. She's great!" said Jackie.

Keeping their focus on the long term, Les and Jackie are looking to the next step of increasing production to offer wholesaling and would love to eventually open their own retail shop, not just with candles but with all of the goodies that compliment them. They continue to work hard to make the best candle they can; continue to look for ways to trim costs; and when the day-to-day bumps and hurdles come along, which they always do, they'll keep looking past to the bigger picture. "We hope one day that our kids can take over for us," Les said, "They can run the operation for us. Of course we'll still be in the back of the shop, melting wax and pouring candles!"