

Smart Cookie

STEPHANIE LINDLEY, WHO TURNED A SMALL-TIME COOKIE COMPANY INTO A MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR WINNER, KNOWS THE PERILS OF LEADING A FAMILY BUSINESS: "IT CEASES BEING PERSONAL WHEN THE LIFEBLOOD OF THE COMPANY HANGS IN THE BALANCE."

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDWARDO

While her college classmates were busy theorizing about the fundamentals of business success, Stephanie Lindley was trading in her textbooks for the real thing. Quick-witted and armed with a penchant for numbers, the ambitious 19-year-old left school to sink her teeth into the mom-and-pop cookie company founded by her great-grandfather in 1924.

But she was stunned to find that, behind the shiny stacks of cookie tins, Byrd Cookie Company was grossly mismanaged and in desperate need of help. Orders were being written up on scraps of paper, and the office manager, who had been there 23 years, had never made a collection call.

"My father ran the family company from afar while also managing his thriving Atlanta-based accounting practice," says Lindley. "But as I delved into the business, I discovered its frailties."

Ben T. Byrd Sr. founded his eponymous cookie company with his own recipe for nutmeg cookies that were packed in wooden boxes and delivered to neighborhood grocery stores in a Model-T Ford. Thirty years later he sold the company to his son, who added his signature Benne Wafers, made with maple syrup, brown sugar and benne seeds, to →



Success is sweet for Stephanie Lindley, the fourth-generation leader of Savannah's Byrd Cookie Company.

bottomline the product line.

In 1988 the company was sold to Lindley's parents—Ben Jr.'s daughter, Kay Byrd Curl, and her husband, Benny Curl.

While Lindley's two siblings were pursuing other interests unrelated to the company, she took over and began cleaning house. With her father's blessing and encouragement, Lindley found herself a career and exceeded her father's expectations along the way. Her fledgling efforts to collect on overdue accounts recouped \$60,000 in the first month. "By my second day in Savannah, I knew that Byrd would be my life's work," she says.

Sales skyrocketed under Lindley's fourth-generation leadership and vision, from a modest \$600,000 in 1988 to \$7.25 million in 1999. In fact, the burgeoning company became too difficult for Lindley to manage by herself, so she asked her parents and siblings to join her. At age 27, she became president; her father, the top number-cruncher in charge of Byrd's bottom line, was named CEO. Her mother and sister manage the retail store; her brother is production manager.

Today, Byrd cookies and crackers are sold in specialty and department stores throughout the country, while its booming mail-order business (www.byrdcookiecompany.com; 800-291-2973) ships to customers throughout the world.

"Byrd is a brilliant example of the way a multigenerational business should be run, and Stephanie has done a remarkable job of fusing each family member's vision for the company," says business associate W. Park Kerr, founder/chairman of the family-owned and -operated El Paso Chile Company. "I admire the risks that she's taken and the success she's enjoying. Her can-do attitude pervades the entire organization."

Under Lindley's leadership, the company opened a new 65,000-square-foot plant—four times the size of its old building—and its retail store was enlarged to 2,400 square feet. The company's biggest growth came in 1989, when the Byrd bakers invented Key Lime Coolers: tiny, tart sugar-coated wafers that remain Byrd's best seller after Benne Wafers, Peach Zingers, Butter Thins and Razzberry Tarts. →

bottomline The company also sells four varieties of cheese biscuits and a line of 11 jams, relishes and condiments.

Despite all these sweets, Lindley faces tough decisions that will affect her family now and in the future. Sometimes it can feel pretty thankless. "The reward," she says, "is knowing that we're building something really great together and that we can all get a good night's sleep." ✈

Cookie connoisseur JUDY ALEXANDRA DIEDUARDO is a North Palm Beach, Florida-based food- and travel-writer. Her stories have appeared in *Bride's*, *The Robb Report*, *Shape* and many other magazines.