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Ted Jacobs Store Reunion Has Family Atmosphere

This article by Ron Vidika appeared in the *Morning Journal* on December 19, 2010.

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LORAIN — Retired Lorain businessman Ted Jacobs has given new meaning to the phrase “family business.” An estimated 45 of his 125 former employees of The Ted Jacobs Store attended a recent holiday party reunion at DeLuca’s Place in the Park. Without exception, each person in attendance described their working days at Jacobs’ women’s and children’s apparel store as being “part of a family.”

“Ted’s a brilliant businessman, without question,” said Barbara Zilko, of Lorain, Jacobs’ longtime secretary. “He has a love and respect of people, no matter what their position. He is a very loving person, and I think it shines through,” Zilko said. “There’s not a week that goes by we don’t run into a former customer who says they’re sorry we closed and asks us to open up again,” said Gail Smith, Jacobs’ daughter, who worked as junior sportswear buyer at the store for about 20 years. “Some still have the clothing they bought from us they’re still wearing. That makes us feel good, too,” Smith said.

Back in 1950, Broadway was a bustling row of stores with shoppers crowding the sidewalks. Jacobs’ store was off to the side, on Fourth Street, away from the main action. Jacobs recalled, “When we started, all the business was on one street. We were off of Broadway. I knew if we didn’t promote the store in a year, it would take us 10 years and we’d never make it. “We were opened for six weeks when three ladies came in. They asked if I would put on a style show for service projects for the city. I told them I wanted to draw a thousand people. They said, ‘You’re insane.’ They said the Style Center, the biggest specialty store in town at that time, had put on a style show and only drew 250 people.

Jacobs used his imagination and showmanship to draw the crowds by using giveaways, bringing in celebrities and having the style show in the Antler’s Grand Ballroom. All that, plus big band music and a dance afterward. “We drew over a thousand people that August,” Jacobs said. The following years saw more style shows as the crowds grew and Jacobs’ name became well-established. The proceeds from the style shows went to charities, primarily those for children with a developmental disability.

In 1956, Jacobs expanded the Lorain store from 2,500 square feet to 18,000 square feet. The rise of shopping malls eventually took the Sears Roebuck and J.C. Penney stores away from downtown Lorain, but Jacobs' store remained and prospered. "Even in hard times, we managed to do good business. The first mall opened in Sheffield Village in 1963. Midway Mall opened in 1968. With the emergence of the malls, the downtown became less of a thriving area," Jacobs said.

In 1991, Jacobs announced his retirement. At this year's reunion, Jacobs — looking 20 years younger than his age, dressed in black sport coat and trousers, checkered vest, white shirt and red tie — stood up in front of those in attendance, and said, "You people are more of a family than anything else. You were all sensational. You were a team. The customers loved to have you service them."

One of the main attractions at Jacobs' downtown store was a parrot named Teddy that lived in a gilded cage in the center of the main floor. Children shopping with their mothers would spend time interacting with the big bird while their mothers shopped. "We got him in December 1965 when he was 4 months old. He was almost like a babysitter. He loved children, and the children loved him back. A business has got to be fun for the customers, first and foremost," Jacobs said.

Twenty years ago, Jacobs told a reporter he worked out every morning and listened to motivational tapes. "The tapes make you feel good. I also love my work. Being excited about what you do generates enthusiasm," Jacobs told the reporter in 1990. At the reunion party, he recalled, "I used to listen to the tapes, without question. I used to listen to them while driving, exercising, shaving in the morning. Everybody at times gets down and need to be uplifted."

Now, Jacobs said he is writing his own motivational book. "The book is titled, 'It's Up to You: Change Your Attitude, Change Your Life.' It's a self-help book to enable people who have problems to find solutions and rise above their challenges," Jacobs said. "These days, I have a Bowflex machine and a treadmill. I alternate and do 40 minutes one day on the Bowflex and the next day I work on the treadmill. Fifteen years ago, I stopped playing tennis because it was hurting my knees. I've cut way back on eating meat. I eat a lot of fruit and vegetables now," Jacobs said. Denise Spigiel, of Elyria, worked for Jacobs for 19 years. "I come back every year to see old friends," she said of the reunion party.

Asked why Jacobs has been so successful, professionally and personally, Spigiel said, "It's his leadership, his professionalism and his caring for people." Another former Jacobs' employee, Jean Molica, said of Jacobs, "He raised us right." Jacobs noted, "I've always had a dear feeling for people in need and always wanting to help them improve their lives, and many of the things I've done are the result of that. "From a business standpoint, I've had a great interest in our customers. I've always felt that even if you go into the deepest woods and give people special service and good values and wonderful benefits, they will come to you."

At the close of the reunion, after warm goodbyes were exchanged, Jacobs said, "It was a very treasured moment. After 20 years that we've been out of business, to have all these people come back, it shows you the camaraderie and great feeling they have for their fellow associates. Some hadn't seen one another since the previous get-together. "They have a great feeling of getting along and empathy toward each other and it's more like a family than anything else," Jacobs said.

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Ted Jacobs welcomes his former employees and shares stories about all their good times working together, second right is Jacobs daughter Gail Smith during the Ted Jacobs Associate's 19th annual holiday reunion at DeLuca's Place in the Park in Lorain on Tuesday, December 7, 2010. Left is Barry Vermeeren and his wife Dixie Bermeeren. Ted Jacobs were a chain of three department stores owned by long time Lorain businessman Ted Jacobs who had a downtown store in Lorain on West 4th st., a Midway Mall location and a store at Great Northern Mall in the tradition of fine clothiers. MORNING JOURNAL/NATE PARSONS