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Birge and Curran 2004 SBA Award Winners

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Steve Birge, along with his partner Mark Curran, has turned a family business adage into a Vermont success story. As Birge tells it, his family's industrial supply business, located in Bridgeport, CT, was the source of business wisdom that has guided his own business - Black River Produce of Proctorsville - to success in a highly competitive marketplace.

"The key to what my family does is that everything they sell wears out," explained Birge. "You have to come back for more," he emphasized. "A good business is one where people need to constantly replace what you sell."

With that in mind, Birge and Curran, partners for 26 years, have turned a \$600 investment and many years of 80-hour workweeks into a very successful food distribution company.

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"Food is the biggest replaceable," said Birge, explaining why he and Curran chose to become food distributors and food retailers.

After 26 years servicing Vermont restaurants, independent grocers and food cooperatives with fresh produce, Birge and Curran have been selected the US Small Business Administration's 2004 Vermont Small Business Persons of the Year.

"They clearly optimize what Vermont small business is all about - quality, people oriented and doing an exceptional job," said SBA district director Ken Silvia in Montpelier.

"Their business is well run, they believe in quality products, and they believe in community," he added.

Previous Winners

Birge and Curran join a prestigious group of Vermonters who have previously won this award. Their predecessors include David Allard at Lyndon Furniture, Millie Merrill formerly with Turtle Fur in Stowe, Fred and Judi Danforth of Danforth Pewterers, Fran Voigt of New England Culinary Institute, and Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben and Jerry's Homemade.

Their peers, some of whom judged their application for the award, know exactly why Birge and Curran won.

"They've grown unbelievably, and overcame some challenges," said Allard. He sees their growth as "astounding" and calls Black River "a unique company,"

"The jobs they create and the volume of dollars they turn over is a big boon for the state," said Allard. "They treat their employees fairly. It is neat that they won."

"It symbolizes that they care about their customers and about their employees in creating a financially sound business," said Merrill. "For Vermont that is the key, the creative business practices. It's the spirit of the company or the fact that everybody feels a real part of it, not just the paycheck," she said. "They have certainly engaged their employees to be a total part of the company."

The Early Years

Birge and Curran came to Vermont in the mid 1970s after college to ski. Birge, now 52, majored in business at Providence College, Curran, 50, graduated from Boston College.

While ski bumming, they also wanted to make the state their home and also run a business. As Birge tells it, in 1977 they hatched the idea for a food retail and distribution business. Black River Produce, a retail store and distributor, opened in 1978.

"A lot of people in the 1970s wanted to get out of the mainstream to a more simple lifestyle," said Birge. "There were natural food stores in Vermont and we thought that was a good complement to having fresh produce, which we wanted to get into."

Birge said the need for fresh produce existed but he and Curran saw no other company filling the gap. "It's a commodity needed by everyone," he noted.

The partners also rode the wave of health consciousness sweeping the country.

"At the time studies were coming out saying eat fresh veggies, we were getting free advertising from this," Birge remembered.

The partners said the early days were filled with "learning the hard way by trial and error and long hours going to the markets."

However, those days were also important as the two built relationships with sellers and farmers and Boston wholesalers at the Boston terminal.

The business was started with \$300 a piece in cash and a loan of \$5,000 from Rutland Savings Bank. Their first delivery vehicle was a used Chevy van.

Today the company owns 32 delivery trucks, racks up more than 1 million miles a year on the road, employs 150 people and has annual sales of \$30 million.

According to Curran, the first year in business the company sold \$70,000 worth of food. "We do that on a slow day now," he quipped.

Black River has grown at approximately 10 percent per year since its inception.

Birge said the two partners were encouraged in the early years by the company's growth and "seeing people approve of what we were doing."

They took no salary for three years deciding instead to plow any profits back into the company.

"We lived on food from our natural food store and we'd live in a house and paint it or do carpentry in exchange for rent so we had no rent expense," Birge remembered.

"We saw an opportunity in natural food as the vogue thing and saw the opportunity," said Curran. "It's a pretty common sense business, you can tell the difference between a good eggplant and a bad one. You learn which foods are in season very quickly. You get a lot of feedback from chefs, who will tell you what they like and don't like."

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