

Blueberry Thrills

Don't aim for success if you want it; just do what you love and believe in, and it will come naturally.

David Frost

In high school, I set a goal for myself. I was determined to be a millionaire by my fortieth birthday. When you are in high school peering at the world through rose-colored glasses, anything is possible.

At that time, I did not realize that youth can cause the mind to play tricks on you, cruel tricks that are seldom revealed until later in life when you are suddenly faced with reality as I was in 1989. There I was, recently divorced, standing in line at the grocery store with my two daughters, amid friends and neighbors, food stamps in hand. Day-to-day survival was the new goal, not a million dollars.

Though I was dependent on government assistance, I did work hard. I was a licensed cosmetologist and also drove a school bus. I had no social life, and frankly, could not afford the luxury of ever thinking of one! Then, I met Dennis Hartmann. We had known each other for some time, but it was not until we were both facing similar situations in our personal lives that our relationship blossomed. In 1990, we married, and I suddenly found myself wed to a third generation blueberry farmer—a real blue blood!

Dennis had been involved in the blueberry industry his entire life and owned a ten-acre blueberry farm that he called “True Blue Farms.” Though my new husband had a full-time job, he spent his spare time in the fields. After our marriage, that, of course, is where I spent what little spare time I had as well. After all, don’t all newlyweds spend their time together amidst blueberry bushes?

After we married, Dennis adopted my two girls, then we had one of our own. We had only \$50 a week for groceries. There was no money for anything else. Every penny we made either went back into the farm or paid tuition for the girls’ education. We were determined that they received the best education available, and we were willing to make every sacrifice needed in order to ensure this.

By 1993, we were still just one small blueberry farm among several others in our rural Michigan community. We were not originally one of those “u-pick” operations, but

sometimes when the other nearby farms were closed, tourists would stop by the house and asked if they could pick from our fields. Of course, we let them pick. Little did we know what we had started; business boomed! That same year, we expanded the business and our production tripled, as did our workload!

While we were in the midst of this blueberry expansion, I listened and watched everything our customers were saying and doing when they came to our fields. They appreciated the fact that we welcomed them to our fields to pick their own berries. While other farmers were inconvenienced by the pickers' presence in their fields, we treated our visitors as honored guests. In retrospect, I feel that this simple attitude that came so naturally for our family was, and still remains, one of the greatest reasons for our success.

We marketed our place as a travel destination, featuring lots of down-home, country fun for everyone! Most of our customers traveled from the city; while chickens, kittens, goats and a host of other creatures great and small were a familiar sight to us, they certainly were not for our city customers! They loved the opportunity to bring their families to a real farm where they could wander the fields picking round, ripe blueberries and experience the pure joy of getting a slobbery greeting from a very friendly farmyard animal. Our goal was to ensure that our customers headed home not just with a basket a blueberries, but with big smiles and cherished memories in their hearts.

Over the next few years, while farms around us closed, our operation thrived. During this period, we also learned the business benefits of collaboration. After some very serious discussions with a neighboring blueberry farmer, Harold Wright, we decided that it would be advantageous for the two farms to work together and start a packing facility. The idea was brilliant! It taught us to partner with other entrepreneurs any time the opportunity presented itself, advice we follow to this day.

By 1997, I was working full-time at True Blue Farms. Whenever we had a question, rather than getting bogged down, we sought answers from reliable experts in that particular field. In the months that followed, we purchased an additional 50 acres, but we did not stop there. When Mr. Wright decided to retire, he not only sold us his share of the processing plant, but he also offered us his blueberry farm. That acquisition brought our facility to 160 acres of blueberries!

In the ensuing years, True Blue Farms has continued to grow and explore new ventures. We now have 75 people on payroll, and last year, we packaged approximately 4.5 million pounds of blueberries! In addition, we have opened True Blue Farm's Country Store, which sells everything you could ever want or need, all made from blueberries! And our mission at True Blue Farm remains steadfast—to provide blueberry lovers worldwide the opportunity to enjoy quality grown blueberries in a fun-filled, family-orientated, yet professional, environment.

Traveling this road has not been fast-paced nor has the journey been easy, but True Blue Farms has proven to be tremendously rewarding. It thrills me to know that I have indeed accomplished a goal that for a while did not seem attainable. When I turned 40, I was a millionaire! I guess that is what you call a blueberry thrill!

*Shelly Hartmann
as told to Terri Duncan*

Epilogue: True Blue Farms is owned and operated by the Hartmann family. The operation is located in Grand Junction, Michigan, a small town situated near Lake Michigan. Blueberry season runs from April until September, and during peak season, visitors are invited to pick their own berries.

In addition, True Blue Farms has a country store on the premises that showcases products made from blueberries, including jams and juices. True Blue Farms has earned a superior rating from the American Institute of Bakers, and their blueberries are approved by the USDA. Many items are also certified Kosher. For more information on True Blue Farms, visit www.truebluefarms.com.

Terri Duncan