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The past 10 years of Abe and Heather Furth’s lives have been a whirlwind of business growth. The duo graduated from the University of Maine in 2004, got married, and opened Woodman’s Bar and Grill in Orono in 2005. They opened Verve across the street in 2009 and spent the better part of 2012 renovating the adjacent four-story buildings in downtown Bangor to house six apartments and another Verve restaurant, which opened in 2013. This past year, growing their businesses and looking forward, Heather prefers to focus on the details and make sure what the couple tackles is successful. “We’ve really grown up together,” Heather says. “Abe spends most of his time at Woodman’s and the brewery, and I spend most of my time at Verve.”

The couple say, without question, that they would not be where they are today without the help of their business coach, Tom Gallant from the local Small Business Development Center (SBDC). “We wouldn’t be here without him,” Abe says. “He has taught us so much. That’s the number one advice I would give to someone looking to start a business in the area—find a business counselor,” Heather says.

With four brick and mortar business under their belt, you’d think the Furths would be ready to slow down. The couple has decided to take 2015 to focus on their existing businesses before moving forward with anything new. “The biggest challenge we’ve faced is fear and self-doubt,” Heather says. “But the more you do it, the less scary it is. Opening Verve in Orono was easier than Woodman’s, and opening Verve in Bangor was easier than opening the one in Orono.”

“Of course that doesn’t mean you leap without a solid plan!”

2014, the duo renovated the basement of Verve in Orono to open Orono Brewing Co. The couple also celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary with a trip to Scotland. Not bad for a couple of 33-year-olds.

“I knew in college that I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” Abe says, who majored in English. Both individuals had a background in restaurants, as they both worked in the industry through college. This entrepreneurial spirit is solely their own—their parents are educators, a nurse, and an electrician.

The duo complement each other in every way. While Abe prefers to focus on be here without him,” Abe says. “He has taught us so much. That’s the number one advice I would give to someone looking to start a business in the area—find a business counselor,” Heather says.

The learning curve was steep when the couple was working on opening Woodman’s. They worked hard to get traditional funding to open. They had to come up with $50,000 on their own before they could even hope to get a business loan. “Where do you come up with $50,000 when you’re 23 to start a business?” Abe says. “You borrow a little bit from a lot of people,” Heather says. “We paid everyone back in five years.”

They’ve also partnered with people who have helped them find success. The couple own Woodman’s Bar and Grill with chef Mark Horton. Asa Marsh-Sachs, a local brewmaster, will brew full-time at the Orono Brewing Co. Abe gets visibly excited when talking about the brewery. Their nine brews will be served at Woodman’s, Verve locations, and sold by the pint and growler in the draft room. The Orono Brewing Co. is a part of the Maine Brewers Guild and the Maine Beer Trail. With the popularity of microbrewing in Maine these days, are the Furths worried about competition? “A rising tide raises all boats,” Heather says. “Brewery tourism is growing, and we hope that our brewery will help bring more people to Orono. We think this will help Orono become the college town we know it can be.”
The only thing Gerry Nasberg knew about pizza when he decided to open a Pat’s Pizza in Ellsworth was that he loved it. “I ate a lot of pizza growing up,” he says. Nasberg, 55, was raised in Bangor. He studied construction engineering at Michigan State University and earned an MBA from the University of Maine in Orono. After school he went to work for a construction company in Jay, Maine. “I worked there for five years and I decided I wanted to do something different.”

Nasberg turned to Bruce Farnsworth at the original Pat’s Pizza in Orono. “Bruce said he really wanted a Pat’s in Ellsworth,” Nasberg says. He took the time to do some market research. What he found was that about 20,000 UMaine graduates lived in the greater Ellsworth area. It’s a rare student that spends four years at the University of Maine in Orono without eating at least one pizza from Pat’s. The nostalgia, Nasberg thought, would help bring in customers.

That was 25 years ago. Today, the Pat’s Pizza in Ellsworth is one of the largest ones in the state. “Our size allows us to do a lot more with the community,” he says. “We do a lot with the area schools. That’s our target audience. One of the Ellsworth High School sports teams even put ‘Fueled by Pat’s Pizza’ on their jackets. We didn’t ask them to do that—they did it on their own! I was so surprised!”

Nasberg never thought he’d own a pizza joint. And starting wasn’t easy. He was able to get a small loan to open the restaurant, and Bruce Farnsworth spent two weeks helping him get up and going. “We put an ad in the paper a couple of weeks before we were set to open in 1989 and no one showed up for a job. Not one person,” Nasberg says, then laughs. “We ran the ad again the following week and Ed Griffin showed up. He was my first hire. He must have been about 17 or 18 years old at the time. I ended up hiring Ed’s mom, his brother, and a bunch of his friends. As many of his friends as he could bring in.” Griffin, who worked at Pat’s for years, is now at Mantinini’s Grill in Blue Hill.

Nasberg credits his employees with the restaurant’s success. “We have some people who have been here for a long, long time,” he says. Another one of his first hires in 1989 was Pam Vafiades, who is still employed at Pat’s. “We’re on the second generation now with some of our employees and we’re looking at the third generation here in a few years.”

One of the biggest lessons Nasberg has learned in starting and running a successful business is that hard work goes a long way. “When we first opened, I worked 80 hours a week and lost 60 pounds,” Nasberg says. He spent a decade living in an apartment on the second floor of the restaurant on High Street. “I literally didn’t go outside to get to work!” he says. He bought the building and has renovated and expanded, adding a drive through area for families on the go.

Four years ago he opened a Pat’s Pizza on Rodick Street in Bar Harbor. His brother, Pete, runs that restaurant. “Bar Harbor is a different market with different challenges,” he says. The Bar Harbor Pat’s is much more seasonal, even though it’s one of the few restaurants in town that is open year-round.

Nasberg’s business has also grown virtually. Tim McCarthy, who has been the general manager of the Ellsworth restaurant since 2010, has helped build a presence on Facebook. “He runs our Facebook page and all of our promos,” Nasberg says. “I think our social media outreach has paid off, it’s given us a boost.” McCarthy uses it to promote giveaways and contests in the restaurant. Last year, Nasberg gave away a cruise to the Bahamas.

He also offers to help community groups raise money. One of his most popular promotions is the Tip A Cup. This is where Ellsworth police officers take over Pat’s as servers, and all of the tips they earn go towards a fund or nonprofit of their choice. “Some of these guys have been doing it for so many years that they are really great servers,” he says. “They really know the menu!”

Nasberg has learned a lot of lessons throughout his 25 years of ownership. “I believe that if you go into a business or start a business that is fully funded by someone else, you won’t do well because you’re not as invested,” he says. “Using your own money makes you work harder.”

When asked about retirement, Nasberg balks. “I can’t see stopping. It’s too much fun!” he says.
Norma Desjardins always knew she would return to The County to practice dentistry. She and her husband, Paul, are both from Van Buren and planned to raise their two children in northern Maine. “We went away and got our education and came back to give back.”

Desjardins was one of eight children in her family. “My mom and dad did what they could so we could see the dentist in town at least once a year,” she says. “I was the only one in the family who got to have braces—my bite was really bad.” Her early dental experiences were positive, and she attended Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, graduating in 1992.

After graduation, she and her family moved north where she opened a private practice in Van Buren. In 1995, she merged her practice with another local dentist and founded Academy Dental in Presque Isle. In March 2012, she went a step further and opened St. Apollonia Dental Clinic, a low-cost pediatric dental clinic. She doesn’t see patients at St. Apollonia, and doesn’t draw anything from the payroll, but her role as CEO fulfills her.

“I felt called to do it,” she says of the clinic. “I have a lot of faith, I was just drawn towards it.” The idea to open the clinic came to her in 2009. Her busy practice and long hours started to take a toll on her health and she began experiencing pain in her neck, shoulders, and arms. She was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and had to rethink how she was going to continue working. “At first I was devastated,” she says. “I didn’t think I was going to be able to be a dentist anymore.” She started limiting the number of hours she saw patients and devoted more time to getting the clinic up and running. She taught herself how to write and apply for grants, which helped secure the funding she needed to get St. Apollonia off the ground.

Desjardins decided to set up the clinic as a nonprofit so that it was easier to accept MaineCare. “Many people these days are working poor,” Desjardins says. “To be able to run a business with a low reimbursement rate is hard. We want kids, no matter what kind of coverage they have, to be able to be served here.” And they are. To date, the clinic has about 2,300 patients, which is a lot for a single dentist. Dr. Erik Johnson joined the practice in July 2013. He has two full-time hygienists on staff to help him care for all those kids. Many of their patients are seeing a dentist for the first time. “This is the first time Aroostook County has had a pediatric dentist,” Desjardins says.

“The extent of disease is great, and little ones need this specialist care.”

Nationally, 10.1% of people live in a Dental Health Professional Shortage Area (DHPSA), which is defined as a region with fewer than one dentist for every 5,000 residents. In Maine, 200,000 people (16%) live in a DHPSA, according to the Center for Workforce Studies. In 2012, Maine had the lowest dentist-to-patient ratio in New England at five dentists to every 10,000 people. Before Desjardins moved back to the area, many families in Aroostook County had to drive to Bangor or Augusta for dental care.

“With the experience of running a practice, I felt that I could help people who weren’t able to come to a regular practice,” Desjardins says. “Many kids come in with their grandparents—we had to figure out permission forms. It’s a lot of work, but it’s worth it.”

Desjardins says that there will always be a percentage of operating funds that the organization will get through grants. She says she’d like to keep that number at 10 to 15%. “The Maine Access Foundation has been incredibly helpful. I want to be sure people understand that it takes a lot of people to achieve something like this. I didn’t do it on my own. I had a lot of help along the way.”
Abby Freethy has turned a craving for ketchup into the beginnings of a lifestyle brand called Northwoods Gourmet Girl. Originally from Pennsylvania, Freethy came to Maine for the summer of 1999 to work as a private chef on Mount Desert Island. She was hooked. Years later she returned to Maine to visit a friend and never left.

Food has always been a big part of Freethy’s life. “My whole line of products is based around how I thought my Gramma would want it,” she says. Add to that Freethy’s touch of sophistication from her background in culinary arts and design.

The Culinary Institute of America graduate started Northwoods Gourmet Girl when she was pregnant with her son. She had cravings for ketchup and French fries, but had always preferred healthy eating and the brands she found on the store shelves didn’t fit the bill. So she made her own. Her country ketchup was the first item she made and sold out of her home-based kitchen in 2005. In 2013, she built a commercial kitchen in Greenville, thanks in no small part to her parent’s help, and expanded her offerings.

Her space in Greenville is a kitchen, store, and packing and shipping center. The 3,000-square-foot space is built with all green products. In May, 2014, Freethy expanded again, opening up a storefront in downtown Belfast. It’s a growth spurt for Freethy, who continues to live in Greenville, and she looks forward to her second summer in 2015.

Freethy’s big dreams and creativity stem from a small town. She is fiercely loyal to Greenville, and sits on the board of a committee that is making it their mission to rebrand Greenville as a destination. “This small town is so important to me,” she says. “We have a world-class lake! I talk to people all the time who have no idea where Moosehead Lake is.” The rebranding process is helping the community figure out how to highlight their strong points and make them stand out. “We’re working on identifying what will bring people to this area and how to provide them with the best experience possible.”

That idea of having the best experience is something Freethy strives for in her own business as well. In an effort to build her lifestyle brand, Freethy’s stores in Belfast and Greenville will start offering homemade food, such as chicken pot pie, flourless chocolate torte, and caramelized onion and goat cheese tarts. “These are things that can be enhanced with my other products,” she says. “My lifestyle brand is centered all around food. It’s an outlet for all kinds of creativity. You’ll see glassware in the shop, some dishes, and you’ll eventually see silverware. We want to offer things that are proprietary, like the fabrics used in the clothing.” Freethy creates all the paintings and has started to make tea towels that proved to be extremely popular at The Maine Harvest Festival this past November. “I want to have the freedom to create anything that relates to food for my brand.”

“Any time someone would say that I couldn’t do something or perhaps I would fail, it would hurt. But then I turned it around into positive energy.”

–Abby Freethy

Freethy will spend the winter working on a cookbook that will share recipes and experiences from every part of her life. “There are going to be big, bright photos and ideas that range from down home recipes to throwing a swanky party,” she says. “You’re probably wondering where Freethy gets all of this energy, this creativity, this need to make things. “It’s an unknown fire,” she says. “Any time someone would say that I couldn’t do something or perhaps I would fail, it would hurt. But then I turned it around into positive energy. I knew from the very beginning that I would get there. I didn’t know how, but I would do it.”

It’s been nearly 10 years since her first bottle of ketchup, and Freethy shows no signs of stopping.
No one is happier that the “other” end of Main Street is now bustling with activity than Peter Geaghan. He and his two brothers, Larry and Pat, have been working at Geaghan’s Restaurant and Pub since they were teenagers. July 2015 marks the 40th anniversary of one of Bangor’s favorite establishments.

“We all started here as dishwashers,” Geaghan says. Pat ventured outside of the family business for a little while, but this is the only real job Larry and Peter have had. “I’ve done every possible job here over the past 40 years,” Geaghan says. All the brothers pitch in when needed, but Larry mainly runs the office and Pat works mostly in the kitchen, Geaghan says. “I’m from a family of 11. At some point, everyone worked here.”

But after nearly 40 years, you couldn’t blame the brothers for looking forward to retiring. “Larry, Pat, and myself, we’re in our 50s getting close to our 60s,” Geaghan says. Larry is the oldest of the three and Peter is the youngest. About five years ago, their conversations turned towards how they were going to phase out the family business. “Things were happening at this end of town, and we were growing at a comfortable clip,” Geaghan says. The addition of Hollywood Casino, the Waterfront Concerts, and the new Cross Insurance Center has brought a lot of business their way in the last decade. How were they going to hang up their hats?

Larry’s son Andy overheard their conversations and proposed an idea. “He told us he didn’t want the business to end and that he wanted to be more involved,” Geaghan says. Andy is a graduate of the University of Maine and was teaching at Brewer High School when he decided to join his dad and uncles full-time at the pub. “When that happened we stopped talking about slowing the business down and started talking about expanding.”

It was Andy who came up with the idea to start brewing. It was an interest that he had had since college, and he knew that craft brewing was taking off. He thought that his family could capitalize on the growing trend and make something with it. Boy was he right.

The family built a five-barrel brewing system onto the dining room side of their Bangor establishment. Geaghan Brothers Brewing opened in December 2011. In 2015, the business is expanding their brewing operation across the river in Brewer. The new facility will be able to produce eight times the amount of beer as the original facility in Bangor, and will allow the brothers to reach markets they can’t currently provide for. “Our distributors always want more than we have,” Geaghan says. “This won’t be a problem with the new Brewer facility.”

The new brewery will produce their most popular brews—Bangor Brown, Smiling Irish Bastard, and The Refeuler. Along with increasing keg distribution, the Brewer facility will also be able to bottle beer for sale.

But it’s not all about business for the Geaghan brothers. This family has been involved in community giving ever since John and Arline Geaghan began the business in 1975. The Geaghans have called Bangor home for generations, so giving back is something they feel passionate about.

“We do a lot of small fundraising all year long, but we’ve focused a lot with Champion the Cure,” Geaghan says. The family has also helped with the fundraising efforts for the new multiple sclerosis wing at the Lafayette Family Cancer Center. “MS and cancer have touched our family in different ways,” Geaghan says.

The Geaghans also sponsor Fusion Sports, a program that is part of Fusion:Bangor, and the Bangor Roller Derby. “We have our fun sponsorships and our serious sponsorships,” Geaghan says.

“We’re a restaurant, but we touch a lot of people,” Geaghan says. “The restaurant has become bigger than us in some ways. It’s a part of the community thread.” And that community, Geaghan says, is still the same as it was when his parents ran the business. “Greater Bangor is a group that cares about their neighbors, and they always will.”
Six years ago, Nancy O’Brien and her husband, Pat, were trying to figure out how to spend more time in Maine. The couple, who had been living in Connecticut, had a home in Bass Harbor, and wanted to become year-round residents of the Pine Tree State. “We came to Bass Harbor as often as we could, and every time we had to leave we cried,” O’Brien says.

Though she had a corporate career, O’Brien was looking for a change. A friend had introduced her to an importer and they had discussed the olive oil business. But it wasn’t until their real estate agent called them with the news that there was a storefront on the market in Bar Harbor that the olive oil idea became a reality. “We rent space within these stores and our employees work there,” O’Brien says.

O’Brien learned about artisan olive oils and vinegars at a breakneck pace. She is careful who she sources from and when her growers and producers are harvesting. In 2009, O’Brien was the only employee; today she has 28. FIORE specializes in Ultra Premium extra virgin olive oils and aged balsamic vinegars. Ultra Premium (UP) is a new category of olive oil that distinguishes it as the highest quality in the world. Their products hail from Italy, Greece, the Iberian Peninsula, California, Chile, Peru, Australia, and South Africa.

In 2010, FIORE received the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce’s Rising Star Business of the Year award after just one year in business. Yankee Magazine named FIORE the Best Around the World Tasting Room in New England in 2012. The following year, O’Brien was named the U.S. Small Business Administration’s 2013 Woman-Owned Small Business of the Year for the state of Maine.

But it wasn’t until their real estate agent called them with the news that there was a storefront on the market in Bar Harbor that the olive oil idea became a reality. They put their Connecticut home on the market and sold it two weeks later. Five weeks after that, FIORE Artisan Olive Oils and Vinegars opened at 8 Rodick Place in Bar Harbor. Since then other stores have opened in Rockland and Freeport. FIORE distinguishes it as the highest quality in the world. Their products hail from Italy, Greece, the Iberian Peninsula, California, Chile, Peru, Australia, and South Africa.

“I really wanted to be local right from the beginning. We are not absentee owners. We like to have a presence in the stores.”

–Nancy O’Brien

With over 50 different FIORE Artisan Olive Oils and Vinegars, tasting is key to sales. FIORE doesn’t sell anything pre-bottled—everything you buy is filled onsite by an employee. “It’s all about the freshness,” O’Brien says. The oils and vinegars are all stored in stainless steel containers, called fustis, imported from Italy. They are seamless vessels so that no air or light gets in. “Air and light are your two worst enemies,” O’Brien says. Each fusti holds about 30 375mL bottles. FIORE’s glass bottles are UV resistant to keep light from reaching the oil.

It’s not uncommon to see O’Brien or Pat working in any of their retail stores. “I really wanted to be local right from the beginning,” she says. “We are not absentee owners. We like to have a presence in the stores.” Pat handles the marketing and delivery and helps source the olive oils and vinegars. O’Brien handles the administrative side of the business, including hiring and managing their 30 employees, some of whom have been with FIORE since they opened. “We have a really great group of dedicated employees. They love the product and it shows!”