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Monday, January 16, 2006

Nice Dream

The first minority-owned Bruster's franchise in the South is enjoying sweet success

Lori Johnston
Contributing Writer

When Ruth Grigsby and her daughters decided to become franchisees, they didn't just pick the first company they liked. They considered everything from vitamin shops to delis, and researched the companies' philosophies, products and principals before choosing Bruster's Ice Cream.

"It was always a dream to start a business in terms of creating a legacy," said Stacey Key, president of GBK Enterprises Inc., which was the first minority-owned Bruster's franchise in the southern United States.

GBK also was the first Bruster's franchise to enter an urban market, Key said, with a store at Georgia State University in 2004. They created partnerships that landed them inside the Georgia Dome, Philips Arena the and Georgia World Congress Center during events as well as at Centennial Olympic Park and Imagine It! Children's Museum.

"The traditional brick and mortar [store] is not always the way," Key said.

As a sign of the success of that strategy, the franchise posted annual receipts of \$500,000 to \$560,000 in 2004, compared with \$300,000 to \$350,000 in 2002. 2005 numbers are not yet available.

The franchise, which employs close to 40 in the summer and 20 in the winter, has been recognized by the Cobb Chamber of Commerce as one of the county's top 25 small

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Joann Vitelli
Sweet sensation: Stacey Key (left) and Ruth Grigsby of GBK Enterprises Inc. say 2004 earnings passed the \$500,000 mark.

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businesses and received an honorable mention from the Atlanta Tribune as one of the city's best minority-owned businesses.

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Leona Barr-Davenport, president and CEO of the Atlanta Business League, said their methodology and planning is impressive.

"I love the fact that they actually interviewed potential financial entities to decide who they were going to do business with," she said.

Key's sister, Nancy Bayonne, first piqued their interest in Bruster's after noticing the popularity of a stand in

Lawrenceville in the fall of 1996. They wanted a product that would draw all age groups. Then they noticed that people were not only standing in line to buy cold treats during the summer but also as temperatures dropped in the fall and as they bundled up in coats during the winter, Key said.

At that time, all three had corporate jobs. The timing wasn't right for a franchise, Key said. But they held onto the dream, and a few years later, after experiencing layoffs, they decided it was the time to proceed.

After being impressed with Bruster's ice cream, frozen yogurt, sherbet, cakes and shakes, they met with founder Bruce Reed and interviewed him about the company.

"I don't ever think you can do too much research in looking at a franchise," Grigsby said.

The franchise investment was in their range (the current fee is \$32,000, and franchisees are required to have a minimum of \$200,000 in liquid assets). They also appreciated Bruster's commitment to the community.

"Their philosophy around service and the high quality of the product really fit with where we wanted to be," Key said.

Their first location, on Cobb Parkway, opened in March 2002 with immediate success. "There was obviously some pent-up demand because when we opened, we just got massacred," Key said.

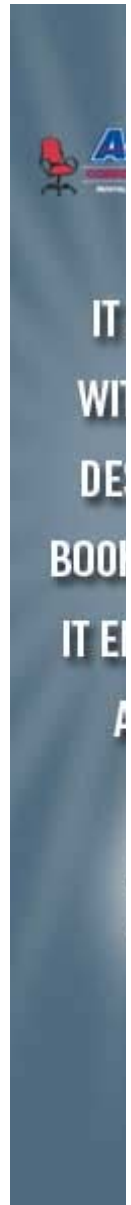
Anyone considering owning a franchise could follow their process, Barr-Davenport said, which included watching the clientele, researching the franchise requirements and interviewing company officials.

"They planned. I know that word is overused, but it's so key to how you go about it," she said. "They took the time to make decisions that were beneficial to them."

All three family members also brought separate skills developed in past jobs -- Key had a background in operations, Grigsby in facilities and Bayonne in marketing.

"All of the skills we developed in corporate came to bear in this adventure," Key said.

Key said another reason for their success has been balancing the winter slowdown with sales at sports and entertainment venues. When the Dome and Arena have fewer



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events in the spring and summer, the business at their other stores picks back up.

Barr-Davenport said the partnerships with entertainment venues and companies are some of the unique ways the franchise attracts new business. "They try to be very creative in their outreach and marketing," she said.

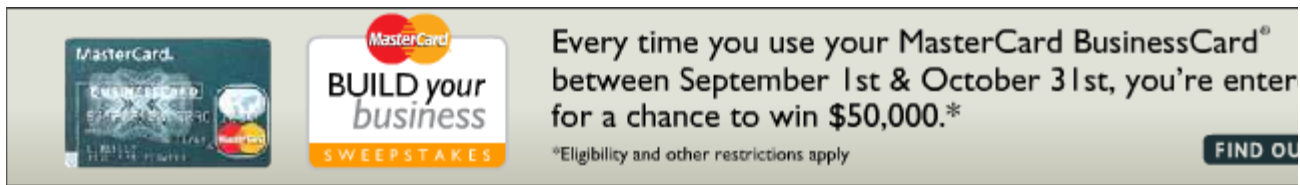
GBK Enterprises also partners with the community in several ways, such as giving a portion of its sales on certain nights to area schools and donating treats to organizations and events. They've worked with the American Red Cross, American Heart Association and Grady Memorial Hospital, as well as local community and senior centers, churches and police departments.

One constant challenge, however, is the work force. Many employees are high school students, and while some return from year to year, others aren't willing to commit to a job, Grigsby said.

The first thing Grigsby does at the store is sample all 20-plus ice cream flavors made fresh daily, which to some may seem like the best job ever. If one doesn't meet her standards, she will pull it out.

"I need to know what the product is like every day," she said.

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