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Candy shop builds sweet second career

Former Thrivent worker learns ins, outs of small business ownership

By Kristin Stankewicz
For The Post-Crescent

GRAND CHUTE — Jamie Fuerst has a sweet job. As owner of Fuzziwig's Candy Factory in Fox River Mall, she spends her days helping shopper after shopper satisfy a sweet tooth.

"We have over 1,000 different candies," Fuerst said, including more than 500 items in inviting self-scoop bulk bins.

The store, which opened last October, is designed to feel like a fantasy candy factory.

Tubes filled with brightly colored candy run along the walls, and rows of bins hold jelly beans, chocolate-covered potato chips and even one-pound Jumbo Jawbreakers, just to name a few.

"Kids buy those more for shock value," Fuerst said of the giant candies.

While her primary customers are middle school and high school students, Fuerst gets plenty of traffic from adults too. "We have parents who have more fun than their kids," she said with a laugh, noting that parents favor candies they remember from childhood, such as Wax Lips, Necco Wafers and Razzles.

"The nostalgia candies are the big thing right now," she said. "Razzles are one of the most popular things in the store, because they were in the movie '13 Going on 30.'"



Jamie Fuerst, a former Thrivent Financial for Lutherans worker, owns Fuzziwig's Candy Factory at Fox River Mall. *Post-Crescent photo by Dave Pieper*

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Bulk candy pricing, starting at \$6.99 per pound, is by section. "People like to try a few different things," Fuerst said.

The store features nearly 30 different small Pez dispensers, plus several giant dispensers, including a Death Star that lights up and plays the "Star Wars" theme.

Special dispensers offer a rainbow of M&Ms, sorted by color. "Those are big for weddings," Fuerst said, adding, "If they buy a lot, we give them a deal."

Her most popular overall seller is "any thing Gummi," she said.

She also stocks a selection of sugar-free candy. "It's pretty good. I haven't had any complaints," she said.

Despite now being surrounded by candy, Fuerst hadn't even heard of the Steamboat Springs, Colo.-company until she saw a newspaper ad seeking a local franchisee.

"They had had someone who was going to run the store and backed out. I responded for more information, and the next thing I know, I'm standing behind the counter," said Fuerst, who worked for Thrivent Financial for Lutherans for 12 years.

After she was laid off from Thrivent, "I wanted to do something on my own. I knew I wanted a change. I liked the idea of a small store," she said.

After researching the Fuzziwig Candy Factory franchise, Fuerst put together a business plan and secured financing. The average cost to open a new Fuzziwig's Candy Factory franchise is between \$200,000 and \$300,000, she said.

The mall built a wall dividing the former Herzberg Jewelers space into Fuzziwig's Candy Factory and Cold Stone Creamery.

Once the wall went up, "It was our responsibility for everything inside," Fuerst said.

For Fuerst, the biggest challenge has been "learning government rules and regulations. The paperwork stuff," she said. "I handle it all myself."

Paperwork aside, Fuerst enjoys running a locally owned business in one of the largest malls in Wisconsin.

"It's very nice because we have the crowds walking by the store all the time," she said. "We have a lot of foot traffic. I don't know how I'd do out in a strip mall. We do have higher rents than we'd pay in other spots, but so far, so good."

While inventory is available from preferred vendors at company-negotiated prices, franchisees can order from any source.

"Over the past year, I've been changing things out that didn't sell," she said.



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That flexibility allows Fuerst to stock regional favorites. For example, she had numerous requests for “candy raisins” from people originally from the Milwaukee area.

“I’d never heard of them. It’s a little gummy thing. The only place you can get them is Quality Candy in Milwaukee,” she said.

With only six part-time employees, plus help from her husband, Howard, as needed, Fuerst spends a lot of time at the candy counter.

One of her favorite perks? “Trying all the new candy,” she said without hesitation. “You have to be able to answer questions. That means you have to go try them all.”

Having a mom in the candy business has been a thrill for Fuerst’s children. “My kids are 12, 8 and 5. They think it’s the most awesome job in the world,” she said.

“The only problem was at first, they thought all the candy was free.”

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