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Sweet Success

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BY Brian Gorman

Going into business was a piece of cake for The Cupcake Girls

Heather White and Lori Joyce are proof that sometimes all you need when you go into business is an idea.

As they say over the opening credits of their weekly series, The Cupcake Girls, which airs Sundays on W Network, they did almost nothing by the book.

They were friends, they had no business plan, they went into a business they knew nothing about, and they hired relatives to work for them.

A formula for disaster?

Apparently not. Their bakery business, Cupcakes by Heather and Lori, is such a success that they own three outlets and have franchised three more, all in the Greater Vancouver area.

So there must have been some wisdom in the method.

"You think two girls who are 27 years old have wisdom?" White asks, incredulous. "I think it's just that we had a lot of passion and drive."

White and Joyce have known each other since they were in high school together in Victoria. After going their separate ways for several years, the two ended up in Vancouver in 2002, looking for a business to start.

As White says, they were 27, and the only thing they knew was that they wanted to run their own show.

"I looked at different ideas and concepts and saw that, in Vancouver, there was a hole in the marketplace for birthday cakes and anything to do with celebrations when it came to desserts," White says.

"I didn't find there was anything to do with cupcakes, where people could go and choose a selection, a different assortment, some vanilla, chocolate, lemon, coconut. And at a birthday party, being able to celebrate with those instead of one particular cake."

The two went into White's "100-square-foot kitchen" and with the help of a couple of friends -a pastry chef and a chef -concocted enough recipes to build an inventory.

They opened their first outlet, in Vancouver's trendy West End, in April 2002. To their surprise, it was an almost instant success.

"We had a lineup out our door and around the corner at the four-month mark," Joyce says. "The first day we opened our doors, we completely sold out. No one had seen anything like it before."



"Maybe if we had done a business plan, we would have realized that you couldn't do it."

A large part of the formula, White says, was the "whimsical flair" they brought to the business. Cupcakes outlets look like something out of a Happy Days episode: all hot-pink, 1950s fabulousity.

And as White says, the decor reflects the product, which looks "homemade, baked from scratch and something you can take to a birthday party and would be a bit of a showstopper."

"That's what our cakes and cupcakes ended up being," she adds. "You open up this box of cupcakes or a cake, and it would be pink and polka dots and full of colour and festivity."

Behind the scenes, the Cupcake Girls are almost as full of colour and festivity. The show is a sitcom blend of the personal and the professional -- with an ensemble cast that wouldn't be out of place in a comedy series.

White's father, Brian, is a self-assigning roving executive and delivery van driver who tends to work hard when the spirit moves him. "Some days, he's a godsend," White says. "And the next day, everything we ask him to do is, 'No!' "

And White's mother, Kathie, is the backbone of production and service -an iron spirit in a velvet personality who embodies the home-cooking aesthetic of the company.

"She really has her hands on the pulse of everything," White says. "She's an amazing multitasker, and she's really good for Lori and I. She's not only my mom; she's like Lori's mom, too."

Meanwhile, White and Joyce juggle everything from purchasing to special deliveries while steering the course of the company at large.

In one episode, we see White fighting her way through Vancouver traffic, desperate to deliver a cake to a wedding and an order of cupcakes to a reception on a yacht -while Brian waits out the traffic happily chewing on a hamburger and an order of fries.

And Joyce, the married one, is incommunicado at a fertility clinic -because she won the coin toss, and White gave up her AA meeting to cut her loose for the afternoon.

Joyce says the key to their relationship is "keeping a friendship and not just being business partners."

"In my opinion, having a business relationship with a best friend is like getting married. When Heather and I incorporated our business, from day one we treated this like a marriage.

"And our first store was the child."