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Alumni Profile: Brenda (Westbrook) Barnicki

A sweet route from chemical engineer to chocolatier

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While a degree from the School of Engineering & Applied Science at Washington University in St. Louis prepares students for a wide variety of careers, Brenda (Westbrook) Barnicki may have stretched hers among the farthest — she's now a chocolatier.



Brenda (Westbrook) Barnicki (Photo credit: Images by Carey Pace)

Barnicki, who earned a degree in chemical engineering in 1986, spent 25 years as a chemical engineer, including four years with Amoco at a refinery and 21 years with Eastman Chemical Co. in numerous roles. After her position as a vice president

of technology at Eastman was eliminated in a company restructuring in 2011, Barnicki took some time to evaluate what to do with the second half of her career. She decided to turn her

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evening and weekend hobby of making chocolate truffles into a business that donates all of its proceeds to nonprofit organizations worldwide that help children in orphanages, in situations of abuse and neglect, suffering from diseases or living in poverty. Her goal is to write \$1 million checks to children's charities.

While it was a big step of faith to open the business, Barnicki says she feels she is doing what she is called to do.

"I was happy and settled and comfortable in my job, and I don't know that I would have done this on my own," she says. "But it has been the best move and the best thing that could have happened to me. I feel so much more fulfilled, and I feel like I'm making a difference."

Based in Kingsport, Tenn., Bellafina Chocolates specializes in made-to-order truffles that include no preservatives or added sugars and come in a variety of flavors, such as espresso, mint, orange and moonshine (her personal favorite). Although Barnicki went to the Culinary Institute of America to learn advanced chocolate techniques, the recipes are all her own.

In addition to running a small retail shop in downtown Kingsport, she also customizes truffles and their packaging with company logos and other designs for corporate gifts. The boxes of chocolate, which she can ship nationwide, also include a card that explains that the proceeds help children's charities. Bellafina has won accolades for its work, including the Kingsport Office of Small Business & Entrepreneurship Award in 2012 and 2016.

The business is run primarily by volunteers, but with her company growing by more than 50 percent a year, Barnicki has added a few part-time employees who may need a helping hand.

"I'm really focusing on women coming out of recovery or have been incarcerated, suffered abuse situations or had some personal struggles that have caused them to need some help to get themselves established," she says. "I would love it if by the time I decide to retire that some of the women I'm hiring would run the company."

Bellafina's volunteers, which include retired women business owners, former teachers and some stay-at-home mothers, also act as mentors to each other and to the women in the paid positions, she says.

While running a chocolate-focused social enterprise seems far removed from engineering, Barnicki says it is very closely related.

"If I think about my chemical engineering degree, the things I learned at WashU set me on this journey and career," she says. "It was a progression of experiences and gaining more skills and responsibility and more connections. I've got a production process, and when I look at it, I'm using the basics of things I learned both at WashU and the manufacturing part of my career, including quality and consistency and root cause failure analysis."

Her business also incorporates what she learned from earning a master's degree in management from the University of Tennessee and a certificate in leadership from the Harvard Business School Advanced Management Program.

"All of those things were leading up to where I am now," she says. "It really enforces this belief that I have that God has a plan for you. Some of the things that I didn't want have been the things that have turned out to be the most important."

The School of Engineering & Applied Science at Washington University in St. Louis focuses intellectual efforts through a new convergence paradigm and builds on strengths, particularly as applied to medicine and health, energy and environment, entrepreneurship and security. With 90 tenured/tenure-track and 40 additional full-time faculty, 1,200 undergraduate students, 1,200 graduate students and 21,000 alumni, we are working to leverage our partnerships with academic and industry partners — across disciplines and across the world — to contribute to solving the greatest global challenges of the 21st century.

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