

Bellafina Chocolates: Combining charity and ministry while staying all-business

By Scott Robertson

KINGSPORT—A love of chocolate and the search for something more meaningful sounds like the beginning of a romantic comedy, but for Brenda Barnicki they led her to found Bellafina Chocolates, a small business with a huge heart for others.

Started at her home in 2010, Bellafina was only a hobby, Barnicki said, but one that gave wholeheartedly to children’s charities—a cause she is passionate about.

“When I started Bellafina, I was a vice president at Eastman, working full-time of course. This was really just a hobby and a way to give back in a little bit more tangible way than just writing checks. I’ve always been passionate about children’s charities, and I’ve always been obsessed with chocolate my whole life. I wanted to find a way to combine those two.”

Brenda said she started on a small scale, in her kitchen, with 100 percent volunteers and 100 percent for children’s charities.

“In the early days, we were literally dipping truffles in a bowl in my kitchen, then we’d take them to the farmer’s market and sell them for different charities. We probably raised \$3-4,000 that first year—the summer of 2010. We did that for a couple of years,” Barnicki said.

Then, three years ago, following a restructuring at her full-time job, Brenda’s job was eliminated.

“I had originally intended on getting another corporate job, but I took a consulting job for about six months to decide what I wanted to do with the second half of my career,” she said. “I came to the conclusion that I really am passionate about this and I wanted to do something that’s a lot more meaningful and gives back more than just a regular job. So, my husband and I worked it out that I could do it on a volunteer basis and I decided ‘I’m going to do it in a serious way.’”

Brenda went to California for culinary training, bought “some more serious equipment,” as she called it, and “That’s what you see here,” she added looking around her business space. “The company’s been growing 50 to 75 percent every year since and it really seems to be taking off even faster most recently.”

Bellafina moved into its current location, formerly the City of Kingsport Traffic Department, in Fall 2015. It is located downtown at 123 Cherokee Street.

Before that, Brenda and a team of volunteers worked exclusively at her home.

“We were probably in my home a little too long,” she said with a laugh. “It got a little ridiculous. We took over about half the house with the company. It was even a certified kitchen. The state would come in for their inspections and all that.”

Brenda said, as Bellafina grew she knew it was time to start looking for a more permanent business solution. She found her answer working with the City of Kingsport.

“I worked with the city for quite awhile [to find a location] and we finally found this building,” she said. “I wanted to get something we could afford without having to pull too much back from the children’s charities.”

In her current, 5,000-square-foot space, Brenda operates Bellafina’s chocolate production facility, as well as a small retail shop.

While the shop contains plenty of truffle choices for sale, it also contains handmade items from volunteers, as well as items that include kitchen essentials, jewelry, scarves and more crafted by children in need and their families.

“One hundred percent of anything purchased from our retail shop goes back to the children’s charities,” Brenda added. “We currently have about a dozen that we support and it will vary both with local and overseas charities.”

Locally, Bellafina supports Tri Cities-area CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) programs; Children Exceeding Expectations, a school for kids fighting cancer located in Bristol; Samaritan’s Purse in Boone, NC; and a number of orphanages internationally.

To make it all happen takes devotion and hard work, especially with an all-volunteer staff.

“Of course we’re a chocolate company, but we are all volunteers with a three-part mission,” Brenda noted. “First, it’s about the children—children who are suffering from disease, abuse, poverty, or neglect.

“Second though, it’s partly about the women who volunteer here. We have women of all different ages and circumstances. It’s a very joyful, productive place to be. We have some widows, some older ladies, some young ladies, and some who are going through empty nest syndrome or different things. So, it’s very mutually supportive.”

As Bellafina Chocolates grows, Barnicki wants to increase that mission statement by adding a few paid positions.

“As we grow, we want to use those positions for women who need a leg up,” she said. “That might be women who have been through a recovery program, or single moms, or homeless women. This may be kind of a first job as they’re reentering the workforce.



“The third part of the mission is to inspire others in some way, primarily to come closer to God and to work for something greater than themselves.”

Part of that goal, to work for the greater good, can be seen in the company’s Sewing Ministry.

In addition to chocolate, Bellafina’s production facility supports a local and global need for clothing and quilts.

“We have volunteer ladies who use donated fabric to make different garments and quilts and we donate them to these causes,” Brenda said.

To date, volunteers who work with the ministry have made more than 700 garments and 100 quilts for local underprivileged families, as well as families overseas.

“We sent a big batch over to an orphanage in Nicaragua and when they sent back photos I recognized one of the quilts a little girl was sitting on because it was my son’s curtains,” she said with a smile.

A poster-sized version of the photo, along with many others, as well as Bellafina’s mission statement is on display in the shop.

“We have a room here where the ladies can come get fabric,” Brenda continued. “All of it is donated from local individuals and area business, like this denim from L.C. King in Bristol. They will come in and get the patterns, fabrics and other things they need and will do it in groups—like a Sunday School group— or individually.”

Brenda said Bellafina also has several donated sewing machines for the project and will be setting up a workroom in the future.

“Right now, it’s kind of a storage facility for about 200 garments we have for donations,” she added.

The retail shop, sewing room and a shipping area are only part of Bellafina Chocolates though. Its delectable namesake is handmade in the back, and Bellafina isn’t just any chocolate. The company specializes in high-end, handmade truffles that come individually from the shop, in gift boxes, and as corporate gifts.

“For corporate gifts, we’ll actually stamp a logo on the box and on the truffles themselves. That’s probably the majority of our business, actually more than half, and why having the production area here is great.”

Corporate gifts from Bellafina are shipped across the United States, many directly to customers from the company who chose Bellafina for their gifts.

The centers of the truffles are made first, then a machine pours chocolate shells over each truffle. After curing, they are hand-packaged by volunteers.

“Depending on the season and how busy we are, we can have half a dozen ladies working back here—during Christmas even more than that. Right after Christmas we had an order for 1,000 boxes and we got it done in four days,” Brenda recalled.

To achieve truffle flavors unique to Bellafina, the company often collaborates with other local business for a tasty outcome.

“We just made the first batch of truffles using flavors from Abingdon Olive Oil Company,” she noted. “We’ve made some flavors from their olive oils and their balsamic vinegars. These are dark chocolate. One of them is blueberry and lemon, and it’s very good.”

Bellafina also collaborates with other retail businesses that use the finished product, including Agota Springs Spa and Cindy Saadeh Fine Art.

“There’s a lot of people who learn about Bellafina through these other businesses,” Brenda said.

Additional partnerships include joint fundraisers with local charities.

“That can take all kinds of forms, but in some cases, the charities will reach out to other board members or supporters who can influence business, and any new accounts they land for our corporate gifts business,” she said. “They get all the profits from those accounts and not just initially. Every time the company reorders, they get a donation from whatever they order. Different charities will do different types of fundraisers.”

Brenda said the community spirit she’s experienced through the creation of Bellafina Chocolates has been an uplifting experience of its own.

“One thing about Kingsport, and really our whole region, is that people are willing to work together,” she said. “What makes it unique, is because all the profits go to charities, whether it’s a company that’s doing their corporate gift or a spa that’s kind of highlighting this, it’s a local product—it’s a great product—it’s all volunteer, and all the profits go to charity. It’s a win-win all the way around.”

Brenda also said she enjoys the job like no other.

“It draws on all of the skills and experiences that I’ve had in my corporate career, but it’s so much more meaningful because you know that everything you’re doing is helping those kids,” she concluded. “So, when I come in on Monday morning it’s not like going to work, it’s like, ‘Oh, boy!’ Besides, it’s chocolate! You can’t go wrong. It’s a very positive, feel good job, and the people that work here are that way, too.”

Bellafina Chocolates can be reached by calling (423) 292-2271, or by visiting www.bellafinachocolates.com.

The company is also on Facebook at Bellafina.Chocolates, Twitter at BellafinaChoc, and has its own YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/BellafinaChocolates.