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update

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FABULOUS FEMALE FRANCHISE FOUNDERS



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FABULOUS FEMALE FRANCHISE FOUNDERS

When the team at Franchise Update first floated the idea of highlighting female franchise founders, we didn't realize how many there are! Our list filled quickly before the day ended, and we continued to add more in the weeks that followed. But perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised. After all, we see successful women leaders in franchising all the time, both franchisors and franchisees.

Like most, we were aware of the more well-known women who founded franchise brands. (Quick: Name five!) But as we dug deeper, we began discovering how *many* women had pioneered their own businesses and turned to franchising to expand them across the country and, for some, around the world. But why should we have been surprised (other than historical bias, prejudice, and stereotypes that just won't fade away)?

Some well-known female founders are among our list, along with many more who aren't so well-known—but likely will be in the not-too-distant future. (Our sincere apologies to anyone we missed). Each has worked tirelessly not only to create a company built around a product or service they saw a need for, but also to spread their vision far and wide, creating tens of thousands of jobs along the way. They are proud of their companies, and despite years of sacrifice and sleepless nights, they wouldn't have it any other way.

While critical to success, the normal yardsticks (sales, units, territories, annual growth) don't shed light on human factors such as courage, determination, and the ceaseless belief in a dream. It takes a strong person to create, build, and sustain a business that began with only a germ of an idea and grew over the years, overcoming all the usual obstacles along the

way—and then some. In their responses to our questions, women founders repeatedly mentioned two challenges, which if not unique to women, are problems they say most men don't face to the extent they did: 1) balancing family with leading and building a company; and 2) greater difficulty financing their dreams (a male banker told one of them to go home and raise her kids!).

We wanted to know more about these incredible women. What was it like for them in the early days? How did they transition from founders to leaders? What are their plans for the future? There was so much we wanted to ask... so we did.

We chose 15 brands, 2 of which were co-founded by women, for a total of 17 Fabulous Female Franchise Founders. Our goal was to provide a detailed, personal look into their journeys so far. We asked them about everything—from how they got started to their influences, mentors, keys to

success, and advice for other women entrepreneurs seeking to follow in their footsteps.

We think you'll see their passion jumping off the pages as you read their stories about the people and events that shaped them—long before they sold their first franchise and then in the years that followed. Time and again they reveal how smart, savvy, and resourceful they had to be in overcoming challenges and making the most of the opportunities that came their way.

These remarkable women were generous enough to share their stories and their time, and we thank them. We hope you're as inspired as we have been in meeting them as we put this, our Annual Women's Issue, together. Courage! And kudos to all! ■



BY EDDY GOLDBERG

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Making a difference in children's lives

If “Undercover Boss” doesn’t call you (or perhaps you just don’t like cameras or value your privacy), you still can go undercover. Julie Bureson, founder of Young Chefs Academy (YCA), did that for two *months* and calls it one of the best things she’s ever done.

Giving the popular E-Myth trope a new spin, she says, “In order to be able to work *on* your business, you have to work *in* it.” She wasn’t in disguise, but the people at a company-owned store in Atlanta (she’s based in Waco) didn’t know who she was—and she didn’t tell them.

“I did everything from grocery shopping to scheduling classes to teaching classes, talking with parents, and answering the phone.” What better way to discover what works and what doesn’t, what your franchisees need and what they don’t.

Founded in 2003 and franchising since 2005, YCA is a cooking school for children that encourages discovery and creativity. “Kids take cooking so seriously these days,” she says, watching cooking shows and getting involved in preparing meals at home and with friends.

YCA employs a membership-based model, and classes are held weekly. The programs not only teach the techniques,

creativity, and fun of cooking—a lifelong skill—they also serve as a social skills program in the age of social media. “Kids from all walks and interests come together in a classroom,” says Bureson. And in YCA’s summer camp programs, 15 to 20 kids who met for the first time are not only collaborating in the kitchen, by

the end of camp they’re making plans to get together afterward. It’s also a social mixer for children of all types. “You see the little shy girl with the soccer star and cheerleaders,” she says.

There are also birthday parties at YCA (think pizza), field trips, home school groups, and seasonal workshops (ginger-



NAME: Julie Bureson

TITLE: Founder, CEO

COMPANY: Young Chefs Academy

NO. OF UNITS: 20 (franchised)

INTERNATIONAL UNITS: 9 (master licensed)

PUBLIC OR PRIVATE? Private

YEAR COMPANY FOUNDED: 2003

YEAR STARTED FRANCHISING: 2005

YOUR YEARS IN FRANCHISING: 10

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bread at Christmas, Mother's Day teas). And to promote the brand and offer a richer potpourri of experiences, YCA has partnered with cooking- and kids-oriented organizations such as *Parenting* magazine and The Food Network.

"What's great is that there are so many areas I can be creative in. It never gets old. We have new customers and a new curriculum all the time," says Burleson. "There's nothing *not* fun or rewarding about this business, but then I'm an entrepreneur at heart."

But clearly, her heart belongs to the children. "The most rewarding part is making a difference in kids' lives," she says. "You just get attached to the kids who come to summer camp one or two weeks at a time."

GETTING STARTED

What inspired you to start your business? I've loved cooking since I was a little girl cooking with my mom, and I've always been drawn to all things culinary. One day it came around full circle. I was in the kitchen preparing a meal when my son asked me if he could help. That's when I had my "light bulb" moment. I'm an entrepreneur at heart, so I'm constantly on the lookout for new ideas.

What is your background? How did it prepare you for starting your business? Before Young Chefs Academy, I was running a small catering business. Before that, I was a scholarship program officer at Baylor University. My background is in business and personnel administration. I think every job you have can prepare you for running a business, whether it's learning how to interact with customers or clients, or negotiating deals with associates. It's all about building strong, healthy relationships through effective communication.

What's the best and worst advice you got when starting out? Best: From my dad, who would always say, "If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is." You have to trust your gut when it comes to important decisions. Worst: From a person who would always say, "Trust me." I learned the hard way (by *not* listening to my father's advice) not to trust some-

one implicitly just because they tell you to, even if they are "successful." Check your sources. Don't get caught up in the excitement of the moment.

Why did you choose franchising? I've always appreciated the business model and thought it could help build Young Chefs Academy into the nation's premier children's cooking school. Franchise owners, as opposed to managers of a chain, have a vested interest in their success, as well as the passion required to operate a franchise. With the help of the right franchise partners, we have created something amazing together.

How did you get started in franchising? I appreciate franchising as a business model and I had even looked into becoming a franchisee for various concepts. As for franchising, I didn't originally plan to, but when I moved to Waco and saw that it was a hub for acclaimed franchise companies, I had access to experts in the industry, a crucial step for taking my business to the next level.

Did you have a partner/co-founder when you started? Why? How important was that in building your company? I enlisted a dear friend as my partner and co-founder. I came up with the idea for Young Chefs Academy and she helped give me the courage to launch the business. In the beginning, it was nice to have somebody hold my hand and jump off the cliff with me. She has since moved on to other things, but she played a key role in the beginning stages and we went through a lot together. It was comforting to have a friend to go through both the challenges and exciting times.

How did you fund your company at the beginning? As you grew? I have invested a lot of my own money and went to the bank for a line of credit. In the very beginning, my partner and I also brought on a partner who made an initial investment.

What were the keys to funding your brand? I was fortunate that I had all of the key elements investors are looking for in a business venture: an exciting and

unique business concept, a proven business model, and a strong trademark.

BUILDING THE BUSINESS

What has been the best and the hardest thing about being an entrepreneur? Best: The opportunity to be creative and work toward seeing your dream become a reality. The hardest part is making decisions that are in the best interest of your company, no matter what. When you take on the responsibility of owning a company, you don't have the luxury of avoiding a business decision when it might hurt someone's feelings or a relationship. You have an obligation to your company and the people who are counting on you to do what is right for the business.

How has your experience in running a franchise business been different from what you expected? Leading a franchise is different than starting your own standalone business. As a franchisor, you are not only a leader of a company. You are also a coach, cheerleader, mentor, motivator, and sometimes rule enforcer for your franchise partners. That said, the role of rule enforcer is less of a necessity if a franchise owner is an effective leader overall.

How did you grow the brand at first? What changed as you expanded? When we first grew the brand, I enlisted a sales team with a lot of experience selling franchises. I quickly learned they were not a good fit for my system. My partner at the time and I relinquished our ties with that sales team and put a temporary halt on selling. During this time, I knew I needed systems in place to ensure a) that my franchisees would be fully supported as we grew, and b) that each new franchise owner was the right fit for the company. That's when I brought on two new business partners who were of the same mindset about how we needed to support our franchisees, who we would sell to, and how we would qualify owners.

How did you transition from founding a brand to leading a brand? It's been a process, and a fun one at that. Overall, I'm learning every day how to be

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a more effective leader, while growing in a way that keeps pace with the direction of the brand.

How would you describe your leadership style? I'm very hands-on and I try to make myself easily approachable. I like to be available to my staff and franchisees. I also know I don't have all of the answers or skills, so I like to delegate tasks that are not the best fit for me and let my team have a chance to shine and do what they're good at. We're a big family, and nothing makes me happier than when my franchisees are succeeding and happy. I grew up as a middle child in a family of five kids and supported all of my siblings. I decided one of my sisters should be on the gymnastics team, so I taught her how to do back handsprings. I didn't know how to do them, but I made sure she did. Then I decided another sister needed to be student council president and I was her campaign manager. Just as I did with my siblings, I'm here to make sure my franchisees (who I also look at as family) are successful.

What is the key to your company's success? Even though I've been in this for 10 years, I'm just as passionate about this business as I was the day I thought of it. And I'm surrounded by staff who are just as passionate about our business. I think that's the key: being passionate and loving what you do every day.

BEING FEMALE

Was being female an advantage or disadvantage for you in building your company? How? I don't ever let being female be an issue with me. I would never think of it as an advantage or disadvantage. I believe that if you go into a situation thinking you are at a disadvantage, you are already making excuses for failure. You can't have that mindset if you want to succeed at something. Alternatively, if you enter a situation thinking you have an advantage, you may be fooling yourself into thinking you don't have to work hard enough. However, there have been times when I've sat back and thought, "Is he treating me differently because I'm a woman?" I don't think about it on a day-to-day basis, but I've had moments where

I've asked myself, "Would he be talking this way if I were a man?"

Have you found specific advantages or disadvantages to being a woman business owner? I don't let being a woman get in the way of running my business. Here in America, we are often very fortunate. I have conversations with some of my international franchisees who face debilitating disadvantages at home. For example, one woman was not allowed by her country's law to fly by herself to visit us in Waco.

What has been your biggest challenge as a woman entrepreneur? I have been faced with moments when I feel as though I'm being patronized or talked down to because I'm a woman. I always remind myself that these people are usually untrustworthy. That type of behavior is a manipulation tactic that I don't have time for, in life or in business. My biggest challenge starting out was realizing I was being manipulated. I had to learn how to see through people to discern their true intentions.

Why do you think there are fewer start-ups with female founders than male ones? For some, the problem could be work/life balance. For example, it can be very challenging for female business owners to provide both their family and their career with all of their attention all of the time. It is for this reason, I can only imagine, that plenty of women are overlooking executive-level career opportunities and business ownership opportunities because it is a hard balance to strike.

What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace? Women, and certainly everyone else, should make it a point to be as confident as possible. When you are confident, nothing in the world can bring you down. I think this confidence can only be developed if a woman is aware of how she works best, as well as what her talents and gifts are.

From a woman's perspective, what notable changes have you seen for women in franchising since starting your brand? I'm seeing more women

involved in franchising and leadership in general than there were 10 years ago. In fact, in the past 5 years, the number of women in franchising has increased by 45 percent.

Which female leaders do you admire? Why? I've always admired Sarah Blakely, the founder of Spanx. I like her tenacity. She is an entrepreneur at heart, and like all of us, she had her share of failures before she found her success. I also admire Dina Dwyer-Owens, co-chair of The Dwyer Group. It's been a pleasure getting to know her. She is one of those experts who always had time for me. She is always available and generous with her time and sincere desire to help, including introducing me to other mentors in the industry.

Has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life? How? Absolutely. Having a mentor is invaluable. It's important to have that unbiased sounding board. They have your best interest at heart and can look at your situation from the 30,000-foot level while you are swimming upstream at sea level.

Are you involved in any female entrepreneur organizations? Not currently.

PERSONAL

What does your typical day look like? I don't normally have a "typical" day. Many days include coming to the office and having meetings with key staff, whether it's planning or brainstorming. I also regularly check in with my franchisees and go over reports. Exciting things are happening here all the time. We just had visitors from Dubai and I will be out visiting franchisees soon.

How do you maintain a work/life balance? For me, having a work/life balance is one of the benefits of being a business owner. You have to work harder and longer, but it affords you the freedom to be able to participate in more family activities. I'm usually able to schedule my work day around important family events like my son's basketball schedule. We try to make family dinner a priority at home. I also make a point of not talking about

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business with my family unless they ask me about it. When I'm with my family, my focus is on my family.

What are your top 5 favorite things to do? Traveling, cooking, spending time with my husband and two children, spending time with my sisters and girlfriends, reading.

What are 3 key words to describe yourself? Creative, motivator, calming.

LESSONS/ADVICE

What's the most important lesson you've learned so far? Always listen to your gut. If something doesn't feel right, then it isn't right. Sometimes you get so caught up in the excitement of growing your business and seeing your dream become a reality that you choose to ignore these voices.

If you could do one thing differently,

what would it be? I would have gathered as much advice from as many franchise experts as I could when I was starting out. Nonetheless, I learned many lessons firsthand that have made me wiser, stronger, and a better leader today.

What's the best piece of advice you have ever been given? My dad used to always tell me that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. As I mentioned, it is so important to listen to your gut feeling.

What advice would you give to other women considering starting their own franchise brand? Surround yourself with as many mentors as you can. Joining the IFA is a great first step. Get in front of people in the industry who will give you their time and share their experiences. I always take the time to share what I've learned with anyone who asks me, and I have found that most entrepreneurs will do the same.

WHAT'S NEXT

What would you like to achieve in the next 5 years? I would like to see our current owners grow their businesses and become multiple-unit owners. I would also like to see our brand meet our goals for expansion in the U.S., as well as internationally.

What's coming up that you're excited about? We've spent the past year and a half getting our systems in place, so I'm excited about the growth of the company. I'm also excited to hit the road and start visiting our franchise locations again. It's important to keep a pulse on the business so you can know exactly what to work on. I went on a South and Southeast tour last year, and this year I'm visiting our New York, California, Florida, and Midwest locations. I can't wait to see the great things our owners are doing around the country, as well as the smiles on all of the children's faces. I can't imagine a more rewarding business to be involved in! ■

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