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MSU awards: All in the family

Written by
JO DEE BLACK

When Dan and Mary Frances Frieling started their business, Frieling's Agricultural Equipment, in 1995, it was run from their home.

Dan Frieling operates a family farm in Chouteau County and is allergic to grain. He started using a grain vacuum to transfer wheat from bins into trucks, which cut down on dust.

There is no auger, so it's also a safer way to transfer grain, he said.

Sold on the product's value from both a quality-of-life aspect and safety, he decided to sell the product to neighbors and acquaintances.

"I used the hood of my pickup to write contracts in farm yards," Dan Frieling said. "And we'd do book work and invoices until 2 a.m. in our living room," said his wife, Mary Frances Frieling, who is the director of nursing at the Great Falls Clinic.

Over the next few years, product lines expanded.

"If a product and piece of equipment is successful on our farm, odds are our customers will be successful with it, too," Dan said.

Eventually, 2 a.m. work hours were extending to 3 and 4 a.m.

In early 2001, the couple decided to purchase commercial property. They opened a showroom and shop at 3400 Old Havre Highway in Black Eagle in 2002. The business has four employees and the workforce expands to 10 in the summer. Frieling's Agricultural Equipment is one of seven Montana businesses being honored with the 18th Montana State University College of Business State Farm Insurance Family Business awards. Frieling's



Dan and Mary Frances Frieling of Frieling's Ag Equipment will be honored Friday during the 18th annual Montana State University State Farm Insurance Family Business awards luncheon in Bozeman. TRIBUNE PHOTO/RION SANDERS

Agriculture is being honored in the category for a business with 10 or fewer employees.

The program was established to recognize the state's family businesses, which make up a significant portion of Montana's economy.

The event is also a way to network familyrun operations with their peers and introduce them to recourses available for family businesses.

Frieling's Agricultural Equipment includes three generations of the Frieling family, Dan's father, Don, is a member of the board. A retired mechanical engineer with extensive business experience, Don is a good sounding board for new ideas, Dan said.

"History is important for any business and Don brings expertise in technology and how to adapt it in farming," Mary Frances said.

The couple's children, Shelbi, a pharmacy student at the University of Montana, and Tyler, a senior at C.M. Russell High school, are involved in the business too.

"We never mandated that our kids work, but they seemed to be here all the time," Dan said. "We didn't strive to build this business as a future for our kids, but the opportunity is here if they choose to come back to it."

Communication and organization allow the Frielings to balance family, careers and business, said Mary Frances.

"We also have great employees," Dan said. "Our philosophy is to earn respect and lead by example."

The couple brings unique skills to the business.

Dan utilizes lessons learned while earning a business degree from the University of Montana. Frieling's Agricultural Equipment practices inventory control through "just in time" delivery.

"When a customer wants a product, we need to have it, but we run lean," he said.

"We also use targeted advertising and focus groups. We'll invite customers to meet with factory representatives to demonstrate a new product or technology."

Mary Frances used experience in areas such as human resources from her nursing administration career to identify benefits Frieling's Agricultural employees may like. Both Dan and Mary Frances were raised on family farms in the Fort Benton area. They know their customer base.

"About 71 percent of our sales are from word of mouth," said Dan Frieling. "Our niche, the key to our business, is that we genuinely care about our customers and how the products we sell will impact their quality of life and bottom line."

Other Montana State University College of Business State Farm Insurance 2011 Family Business award winners are:

»Small Business, with 10 to 30 employees, Don Aadsen Ford in Ronan.

Don Aadsen was hired on as a general manager with Hanson Motors in Ronan with the option to purchase and in March 1966, the dealership was renamed Don Aadsen Ford. In 1996, a new dealership was built, putting all departments under one roof with the dealership growing from 10 employees to 25 employees. The dealership has seen three generations of family members involved in the business.

»Medium Business, 30 to 50 employees, Stevenson and Sons Funeral Home Dale and Marlene Stevenson first purchased a funeral home in Miles City in 1962 and have since expanded the family business, Stevenson and Sons Funeral Home, into Forsyth, Broadus, Terry, Jordan, Wolf Point, Circle, Poplar, Culbertson and Helena. There are currently three generations involved in the business, including the first licensed woman funeral director in Montana.

»Large Business, more than 50 employees, Billion Auto Group in Bozeman.

The Billion Auto Group started out with a business card and entrepreneurial spirit. Joe Billion's father took his knowledge of working at dealerships and brought it west, going door-to-door from Sioux Falls, S.D. to Bozeman asking dealerships if they were interested in selling or taking him on as a partner. This left an impression with the GM dealer in Bozeman. Joe Billion and his father entered a joint partnership to purchase the GM dealership in March 1978. In 33 years, he diversified and expanded Billion Auto Group into five stores in two communities with 130 employees.

»New Business, operating less than 10 years, Montana Monster Munchies in Bozeman.

Montana Monster Munchies, LLC was originally named the Montana Biscuit Company and started as a retail cookie bakery prior to metamorphosing into what is now a commercial bakery with multiple product lines. The current owners bought the company in 2005 and have grown the company's branded and private-label products which can be discovered in national parks and zoos throughout the U. S., in more than 40 states as well as online. The company is based in Bozeman.

»Established business, operating more than 50 years, Harrington Bottling Company in Butte.

In 1937, Philip Harrington began producing Pepsi-Cola in a small plant in Butte. The Harrington Bottling Company territory now includes, Helena, Bozeman, Anaconda, Dillon and Livingston and is one of the few remaining plants that continue to produce as well as distribute products. Distribution warehouses are maintained in Butte, Helena and Bozeman. They produce, sell, distribute and merchandise a full line of Pepsi-Cola products as well as many other allied brands including a line of bottled water products under the name Montana Treasure.

»Special recognition, Headwaters Seat Covers.

Paul Lindsoe started Headwaters Seat Covers, LLC in 2006 with the simple idea of making the best fitting, most durable seat cover with everything a sportsman and outdoorsman would want and get it to them in a timely fashion. This company was very resourceful, utilizing resources like the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center, Prospera Business Network (previously Gallatin Valley Development Corp.) and the Montana State University College of Business consulting course. This earned them this special recognition award of "Best Use of Support Services." Since opening their business, sales have increased every year.