

Market Knowledge and Networking Lead to Sweet Success for New Business

Laura Darnall of Savannah decided early on that she didn't want to work for anyone but herself. "My mother was an entrepreneur. She had me selling toaster covers door-to-door at 10. At 11 I was selling Fuller brush and Stanley products, and at 12, Kirby vacuums."

Darnall's door-to-door days are long gone. She and her business partner, Lois Judy, now produce and sell Fondarific, a mouth-watering, high-quality fondant that is a favorite among sugar artists and cake decorators around the country. Michael's Craft Stores sell their product under the private label of "Chef Duff Goldman distributed by Gartner Studios." It sells nationwide under its own name in retail stores, bakeries and on the Internet.

The product began in 2004 as a candy clay-dough that Darnall created to use as a teaching tool for preschoolers. When she saw how much her students enjoyed its taste, she started test marketing it at a Savannah mall and put it on the Internet.

A judge from the Food Network, Kerry Vincent, found Darnall's product on the Internet and contacted Darnall about attending the Oklahoma State Sugar Art Show in Tulsa. "I had two weeks to manufacture 1,000 pounds and get it out to Oklahoma," she says. "When Kerry saw the response I was getting, she told me I needed to turn it into a fondant."

So she did. With the help of her business partner, Darnall began building a new business around the product, branding both "Fondarific."

A long-time client of Savannah SBDC consultant Connie Edwards, Darnall sought her help in developing a business plan, market analysis and financial projections. In 2009, Edwards and area director Lynn Vos helped them run the financials and assisted with obtaining a bank loan to produce larger quantities of their product.



SWEET SUCCESS: Persistence has paid off for Laura Darnall, left, and Lois Judy.

"Laura and Lois continually research their market, attend trade shows and conferences, and network," says Edwards. "When they began to get inquiries from outside the country, we brought in help from our International Trade Center to advise them on shipping their product."

Demand for Fondarific has grown exponentially. By early March, sales were already three times higher than total sales in 2009. When they founded the company in 2008, they moved production out of Darnall's backyard and into 1,500 square feet of industrial/office space. The company now occupies about 5,000 square feet. Employment has quadrupled, from three employees to 12, and they expect to hire more. And last year, Fondarific won the Flavor of Georgia Contest.

"Laura has been very persistent. She never gave up on developing products that she thought would work and finding the market for the product," says Edwards. "That persistence has contributed to their success."

"Connie is my concrete. I don't think I could have done it without her and Lynn," says Darnall. "Since 2004, anything I have needed, anything I didn't know, they have found it for me."