

Georgia's Small Business Person of the Year Says Owning His Own Business 'Fit My Personality'

Scott Blackstock has fond memories of his first experience working in a small business: "I was four years old when my father bought a tire store. He paid me a penny a tire to wash the whitewalls and I made enough to buy two Cokes a day."

Today, Blackstock is Georgia's 2009 Small Business Person of the Year, and he's still washing tires. But now he's doing it in his growing chain of express carwashes, with locations in Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina.

Blackstock is among the successful small business owners from each state selected by the U.S. Small Business Administration to be honored during Small Business Week in May.

The Tidal Wave Auto Spa company is the latest venture for Blackstock, who has compiled a number of impressive achievements in business development, product innovation, and community service.

Blackstock graduated from Georgia Tech in 1979 with a degree in chemical engineering and worked in that field for two years, until his father offered to sell him the tire business in his hometown of Thomaston.

"I was only 25, but I already knew owning my own business fit my personality," Blackstock says. "I like the responsibility and the independence. It's not easy, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Blackstock operated a tire and auto service center for more than 20 years. During this time, he branched out into other successful ventures, including auto parts, real estate development and Thomaston's first express oil change business.

In 2004, Blackstock opened his first Tidal Wave Auto Spa on Riverdale Road, just south of the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International airport. The rest is car wash history. His car wash business, which started with two part-time employees and one location, has grown to almost 100 full and part-time employees and 11 car washes, with the 12th set to open in July. His company, which includes Tidal Wave and other entities, has seen sales grow from \$271,000 in 2004 to more than \$6.5 million in 2007.

In starting and growing his business, Blackstock has made good use of federal and state small business programs for financing and training. He used three SBA guaranteed 504 Development Loans to help finance three of the first five of his Tidal Wave Car Wash sites and took advantage of entrepreneur training programs offered by the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network. In 2006-2007, Blackstock took the Incubator Without Walls (iWow) management class at the SBDC in Columbus. As part of the program, he graduated from the SBDC's "FastTrac"® Growth Venture and Hypergrow Programs. These programs provide entrepreneurs, like Blackstock, with new skills and training to successfully manage rapidly growing companies.

"I highly recommend that anyone thinking about starting their own business develop a relationship with their local SBDC office," says Blackstock. "There are a lot of free programs and the ones where there is a charge are incredible bargains. It's amazing how much information you can get from the programs. Entrepreneurs tend to be independent, but there's a lot of help available out there and you'd be crazy not to take advantage of it. I know Lori Auten (area director) of the Columbus SBDC office was a tremendous help to me."

Blackstock sold his tire center and auto parts companies in 2005 to devote his full attention to other businesses that make up S.S. Blackstock Inc. This includes the Tidal Wave business, which is now the core of his corporate holdings.

"Our car washes are designed to make it so convenient, so easy and so cheap that it's just not worthwhile to do it yourself," Blackstock says. "It's also much better for the environment. We only use 15 gallons of fresh water for each wash while the average person washing his car on the driveway uses 90 gallons."

In Georgia, the company has car wash locations in Athens, Griffin, Hampton, Morrow, Decatur, Thomaston, College Park and Stone Mountain. There's also one location in Alabama and three in Charlotte.

Despite the economic downturn, Blackstock says, "Our business is booming. The express car wash business actually seems to thrive during a recession. People are still getting their cars washed, but instead of paying \$35 at other places, they pay \$3 at our car washes."

For anyone thinking about starting his or her own business, Blackstock offers this advice: "First, don't do it thinking it's going to be an easy job. It's rewarding, but it's not easy. Second, find out all you can...get with your local SBDC office and get advice."



Scott Blackstock