

Businessman lives out his dream / Party-supply operator spent many years in another industry before venturing out on his own

[Final Edition]

Richmond Times - Dispatch - Richmond, Va.

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Date:	Apr 10, 2006
Start Page:	F.7
Section:	Metro Business
Document Types:	News
Text Word Count:	944

Document Text

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That small job at that even smaller tool shop in Bucks County, Pa., wasn't enough for Jeff Johnstone.

It was fine when he was 15 years old, in the early 1970s. He needed a job, and Phil Leber from church, who had just bought George's Tool House nearby, was willing to give him a shot keeping up equipment and making sure everything in the shop was in order.

The pay - \$1.50 an hour - couldn't get him back and forth to work these days, but it was fine at the time.

He befriended Leber, a humble man who didn't even bother changing the name of the tool shop after he bought it despite customers always botching his name.

"I don't care what people call me," Johnstone remembered him saying.

Over time, Johnstone would learn from him.

He would handle the payroll. He'd think about ways to market the business. He'd learn new software for the store to use. He'd even go back to school to take a couple of accounting courses.

"My education at the tool company was pretty thorough," he said.

But Johnstone would eventually outgrow the job.

Time passed, and one day he woke up with a wife and four children, the youngest just a month old. And he was still at the tool shop.

"It was a little frustrating at times because I knew that this wasn't what I wanted to do with the rest of my life," he said. "But what I didn't know was that it was preparing me for something I did not know was coming."

He had to make a move, and he decided that move should be similar to the one Leber made years ago.

He left the tool shop, packed his bags and moved to Virginia to start his own business.

"When I left there, it certainly was a shock," he said. "Phil wasn't happy to see me go, but I think he saw a little of

himself in me and understood I needed to chase my dreams."

In the nine months after the move, Johnstone's life went from neutral to fifth gear.

"It was pretty quick," he said. "When I look back on it, it was pretty insane, quite frankly, but it all worked out pretty well."

His family bought a house in Richmond. A few Baltimore businessmen who owned a party-supply store called Party Perfect helped Johnstone, who later decided to buy party supply store Aarow Special Events, and make a few changes.

"They spelled it with two As so their name would be in the front of the phone book," Johnstone said. "It's the oldest trick in the book."

Johnstone would scratch the name altogether and rename the company Party Perfect, the same as the one in Baltimore. The stores are now affiliated and have expanded into Washington and Virginia Beach.

That was the start of the facelift. Johnstone's goal was to become the top provider of equipment and services in a 100-mile radius. He wanted to bring in \$750,000 his first year.

He understood it would take more than the normal eight-hour days to get there. He just had to make his family understand, particularly his wife, who would have to stay home with the children while he worked.

"We made a commitment to each other that at least for the first two years I was going to focus on the business," he said. "She's a good woman, and I love her dearly. She stuck with me."

The business would start with a core of four or five workers in a warehouse on Dabney Road.

"It was almost like a hardware store," he said. "You came up to the counter and placed your order."

Johnstone would find himself setting up 6,000 chairs for a graduation ceremony at Hampden-Sydney College or Longwood University, hanging candelabras on each pew for wedding ceremonies, pitching tents for outdoor events or laying out linens for fancy formals.

He'd section off the front of the warehouse and create a showroom with warm pink walls, soft green tablecloths under flat-screen monitors displaying pictures from the parties Johnstone set up in the past.

"We wanted to create an atmosphere where folks could come in, sit down and chat with someone in a less stressful environment so you don't see all our equipment laid out there," he said.

After 10 years, his staff was larger and so were his jobs. He had linked up with the Baltimore location to set up balls for the past two presidential inaugurations.

That warehouse is now full of chairs, flatware, tent tops, linens, a tiki bar and a chocolate fountain. Two of his most trusted employees are Johnstone's sons, 18-year-old Tyler and 21-year-old Ben.

Seeing them pushing handcarts or crunching numbers in the warehouse makes Jeff think. As Jeff starts to grow out of his role as head of the family business, maybe his sons are starting to grow into it.

"My 21-year-old has an interest in running the business," he said. "And that's an issue I'm starting to wrestle with. What is the future of this business? I'm only 48, but I'll be 58 before I know it. I'd like to have a plan in place so we know where we're headed."

THE RESUME

Name: Jeffrey Mark Johnstone

Born: Sept. 5, 1957, Baltimore

Education: Bachelor's degree, Lancaster Bible College

Family: Wife Kathy; sons Ben, 21, Tyler, 18, and Jared, 14; daughter Megan, 11

Fun fact: Once drove a limousine and transported Cheech and Chong to a performance. "They were lousy tippers!"

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MEMO: TRADE NAMES. SMALL BUSINESS.

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