

SUNDAY NEWS

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BUSINESS★★

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Jack Leonard/SUNDAY NEWS

Sitting in his office at Corner Cafe, Allen Groff took on two business ventures after losing his job at age 54.

His new life begins at 54

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Allen Groff made a good living in the food industry for more than 25 years.

He spent the past 12 years ensuring Tropicana products reached customers in a timely fashion. The regional sales manager spent long hours with a phone to one ear.

Before that, he sold products for Knauss Foods in Lebanon, the makers of Lucky Leaf apple-sauce, he said.

Then, at age 54, he was fired.

Today, a little more than a year later, Groff is president of Coleman's Ice Cream and owner of College Comer Cafe, formerly Lancaster Legal Bagel on Harrisburg Pike.

"I knew it was coming," Groff said of his termination with Tropicana. "They put me on 90 days probation so I knew."

"They were tired of me, and I was tired of them," he said. "I just rode the horse as long as I could until the inevitable."

At 54, he wasn't quite old enough to retire. Nor was he ready.

"I had three things against me," he said. "Age, relocation... and my salary requirements."

Fortunately, Groff got a severance package from PepsiCo, the owners of Tropicana. "The nice part of PepsiCo is they recognized my age and kept me on inactive status for a year which took me to [age] 55. Then I got full retirement benefits."

That date, May 12, "is when I was fully retired from them, but not from life."

As soon as Groff saw the writing on the wall, he called on recruiters in the food industry that he has been working with. "They used to call me for names all the time."

But after three weeks, "I knew I had to make something happen." Not one of the recruiters called Groff back. In fact, to date, none have called him to offer their help.

"If you wait for help, even with friends out there, it won't happen," he said.

Groff, a gifted talker, got into conversations with a church friend, Tom Kile. A real estate developer, Kile saw an opportunity to take over Coleman's Ice Cream and knew Groff had the food background to make such an acquisition fly.

"He knew the previous owners, I Diane and Steve Lueder, daughter I and son-in-law of Frank Coleman," Groff said.

Several rounds of talks followed and after seeing the company as a viable one, "I jumped in deep water with or without swimmies, but I know the food industry," Groff said.

"I have the background and connections there. It's my comfort zone, I guess."

A year after losing his job, Allen Groff has gotten into the bagel and ice cream business with College Corner Cafe and Coleman's ice cream.

Just taking over the ice cream company wasn't enough. Groff said his vision for the local favorite is to expand the brand name throughout central Pennsylvania. "With my connections in distribution, maybe we can expand into West Virginia, Ohio, Baltimore/Washington, and upstate New York."

Currently, he said, ice cream sandwiches, pies and cakes are sold through the area's independent grocers such as Oregon Dairy and Darrenkamps. They are also sold in convenience stores.

"It gets better every day," he said. "It hasn't been a year yet, and we've made plenty of inroads. Our motto is 'Clean it up and build it up.'"

But Groff didn't stop there. Through conversations with Mario Pugliese, owner of Lancaster Legal Bagel, about opening a shared-space food court with four businesses under a joint manager, Groff was approached about buying the bagel business.

"I pursued it to see where it would go," he said.

What he found was a business with fixed expenses. "The bagel business was established, but it was done by 3 p.m."

Groff looked at the setup and thought, "Why couldn't we incorporate the ice cream into the business? Put two different businesses together that attract people at different times of the day."

Now called College Corner Cafe, the restaurant across from Franklin & Marshall College along Harrisburg Pike serves bagels and bagel sandwiches and wraps for breakfast and lunch. Then ice cream is available all afternoon and evening along with barbecue from Tri County Catering. "Everything is local and Mario still makes the bagels for us and delivers them fresh every morning. We bake them on the premises so everything is fresh, never frozen," he said.

While it wasn't an easy transition, Groff has learned from it and gained energy to create new goals and meet them.

This month, he will open College Comer in Millersville, across from House of Pizza. In addition, he wants to expand the bagel business by possibly starting a catering arm that would provide luncheons for local businesses, private parties, even church functions, he said.

"I've managed people for 40 years and now I have good management in place here [College Comer Cafe] and at Coleman's which allows me to continue to pursue additional growth opportunities for both."

Obviously not nearly ready for retirement, he said, "I will take this one day at a time and enjoy it. There is always hope there."