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The SCOOP on Handel's

A QUALITY PRODUCT AND CONTROLLED GROWTH HAVE BEEN THE KEYS TO YOUNGSTOWN-BASED HANDEL'S ICE CREAM'S SWEET SUCCESS.

By Sara Lepore
 Photography by Eric Pitt

When Bill Cosby came to Youngstown for a show a few years back, his limo driver told him he had to try some Handel's Ice Cream while in town. So during his first performance, Cosby asked the crowd if Handel's was any good. The cheers and applause he received answered his question. In between shows, he decided to try some for himself. During his second show, he could not stop raving about it. To this day, he still has pints shipped to his home.

Leonard Fisher had a similar experience. When he moved to Youngstown from his native New York City in 1975, someone told him he had to try Handel's Ice Cream.

Leonard Fisher, owner of Handel's Ice Cream

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"I said, 'How good can this stuff possibly be?'" Fisher remembers.

Though it took him forever to find the nondescript ice cream stand, which was located behind a large building in an alleyway that was a one-way street, only one mouthful of the creamy homemade ice cream and he was hooked.

Fisher, who grew up in a candy store in Brooklyn, has spent most of his career in the food-service industry. Not long after moving to Youngstown, he opened up the Yellow Submarine Sub Shop with a friend. They grew the store to three locations. But after five years, the partnership fell through and Fisher moved on to other things, all the while frequenting Handel's.

One day an idea struck him: sell pints of Handel's Ice Cream in grocery stores. As it was, people would come from all over the area and stand in line for more than 15 minutes just to get a taste. Why not make it easier for them to obtain?

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—LEONARD FISHER, HANDEL'S ICE CREAM

So in 1984, Fisher approached Alice Handel, who founded the ice cream shop in 1945, with a business proposition. He had already done his research and called around to a few different grocery stores. They loved the idea and said they would sign up for 500 pints a week.

Handel would not have it. She refused to let anyone back in her production area, and was satisfied making the ice cream one batch (20 pints) at a time for her loyal customers. Though she had already sold and

bought back her business twice, it wasn't up for sale, she told Fisher.

But Fisher's ideas stuck with her. And not long after their first encounter, she offered him the business. He bought it in 1985 and Handel worked for him until her death on Mother's Day in 1987.

"She just loved the ice cream business," Fisher says. "She just loved making people happy."

Fisher did try to sell the ice cream in stores, but it did not work out.

"We were losing some of the retail business," he says. "You have to make a decision, either retail or wholesale." Fisher chose retail and opened a second store in 1987.

Today, there are 35 Handel's Ice Cream stores in five states. Twenty-eight of those are franchises. Last year alone, Handel's opened eight locations and this year it will open two to three more. In 2007, Fisher expects another big growth spurt.

Handel's offers 48 flavors every

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day, but has a total of 200 different flavors that are rotated throughout the year. And Fisher continues to come up with new ones. His latest, Bananas Foster.

"I love coming up with new flavors," he says. "That's the best part of my business."

But his favorite flavor remains Butter Pecan.

Though Fisher receives unsolicited franchise requests on a daily basis, he

is careful about choosing his franchisees. They must be financially secure and have a business background. And, they have to be in business for a minimum of two years before they can open a second location.

"We don't like to waste people's money," he says. "We want to make sure they grow successfully."

Fisher attributes his business' success to high ideals and controlled growth. Each location uses the origi-

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nal recipes and makes the ice cream one batch at a time.

"Quality is most important to us," he says. "We love what we do and I think it shows in the product we have."

In addition to its celebrity customers like Bill Cosby and Tom Cruise, Handel's has been named one of the 10 great places in the country to get a scoop by USA Today and People magazine.

This month, WKBN, the CBS affiliate in Youngstown, will feature Handel's in its "Salute to Success" series that launches this month as well.

In partnership with the Youngstown/Warren Regional Chamber, WKBN will feature a short segment once a week during the 6 p.m. newscast highlighting a growing business based in the Mahoning Valley. The segments will introduce businesses large and small, new and long-standing, and from a variety of industries to showcase the area's broad market.

"Sometimes, the only time [something] becomes news is when it becomes a problem," says David Coy, vice president and general manager of WKBN. "We thought it might be neat to take a little bit of time and highlight, or salute, businesses here."

Some of the other businesses to be featured include national fast-food restaurant chain Arby's, which started in Boardman in 1964, Goldstein's Furniture, and Jump Stretch Inc., the maker of strength-training bands.

This partnership is part of a recent push by the Chamber to educate the public and raise awareness of some of the successes happening in the Valley.

"What we want to do is try to promote the companies here that people don't ever think about," says Thomas M. Humphries, president and CEO of the Chamber. ☛