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Small-town market finding a place in Fairport

By THOMAS ADAMS - 1/21/2011

Julie Stolze waited for years for a replacement for the Tops store in the village of Fairport after the grocery chain moved to outlying Perinton, and then she decided to take the matter into her own hands.

Stolze, 52, launched the Red Bird Market on May 1, 2008, opening a niche retail business that specializes in locally produced foods and goods.

"As we've grown and had more experience, we've noticed that people love the local food," she says. "There's such an emphasis on buying local and supporting local business."

Stolze is the daughter-in-law of William Stolze, co-founder of RF Communications. Her brother-in-law, also named William, is the Red Bird Market's part-time bookkeeper.

Stolze's store sells a few national brands. She and the market's nine part-time employees—all of whom are friends or relatives—are asking customers for suggestions on locally produced items that could be added to the store.

"Our goal for this year is to squeeze as much in here as we can," Stolze says. "We'll continue to carry the staples—canned tomato sauce and peas and things like that—because there is a need for that here. But we want to be the go-to place for the really great local stuff."

Stolze's first local partners included the Pie Lady and the Ravioli Shop from Fairport, the Pierogi Guy from East Rochester and many vendors from the Fairport Farmers Market.

Allens Hill Farm just south of Bloomfield in Ontario County, whose honey and maple syrup are on the shelves, was among the local producers subsequently added. Fairport's Flour City Pasta came on board last fall.

"We have been growing steadily," Stolze says. "In 2010, we grew about 15 percent over 2009. We get new customers every day, and most of those people are coming back."

"We're pleased with it. We would like to be a lot busier, and we have room for a lot more products."

The Red Bird Market has its roots in a village survey compiled four years ago, in which village residents ranked a grocery as the top need.

"My husband and I had talked about whether or not a grocery would ever come and decided it would have to be local," Stolze says. "We already have a butcher in the plaza and at the time there was an independent bakery in the plaza. Those are the two departments that most grocery stores make their money on."

Stolze spent nine months putting together a survey of her own, asking residents how often they would shop at a small, independent grocery, how much they would spend, what products they would expect to find and what hours they would expect the store to be open.

"I walked all over the village handing it out," she says. "I gave people stacks and asked them to hand it to their friends."

Stolze also conferred with representatives of the state Small Business Development Center.

"The initial concept was just to have a general grocery," she says. "In talking about it, we decided we had to have something beyond that because I can't compete with Wegmans prices."

Stolze's business model was influenced by two businesses from her hometown of Wadsworth, Ohio. One specializes in bulk foods and snacks. The other was the local Ace Hardware Corp. store.

"The other thing I thought would be a nice tie-in was the Fairport Farmers Market," she says. "That's how we started off with local. I do carry a lot of Fairport Farmers Market vendors' products year-round."

The market has not turned a profit in its first three years, but Stolze thinks that may change in 2011.

"We're nearing that," she says. "We expected it to take time. We started off with a general grocery, and that's the smallest margin in any grocery store.

"But we're moving in the right direction. I see this year as being a really good one for us in terms of reaching that goal."

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