

Features

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Changing an Icon & Growing Careers

Ronda Payne



Part of the community since 1969, Himmel's Farm and Garden Center in Pasadena, Maryland, was something of an icon. It was where Elizabeth Elliott fell in love with the industry. Some 20 years later, she found herself buying and transforming the location while also giving young people opportunities similar to her own.

"This August 1 it will be one year," she says of the purchase and establishment of Himmel's Landscape and Garden Center. "I worked for this particular garden center. It's in my hometown."

She'd always loved gardening and growing vegetables from seed and working for Himmel's allowed her to take things a step further to start her own landscape company. But, as is so often the case, life has other plans and Elizabeth found herself moving into a career in higher education and from there, she went on to work in a non-profit.

"Then two years ago, the owner called and said, 'You always said you wanted to buy this place one day, but you don't want to buy old Himmel's do you?'" she explains. "I said, 'Wait, wait, I do!'"

Making the Transition

With no idea how it would all come together, Elizabeth knew it was time to realize her decades-old dream. It took about six months to negotiate, but she quit her business-suit-and-heels-job to don gardening gloves and return to her first love.

"I actually left my job and jumped on board here starting in April 2018 as a full-time employee," she explains. "I took the opportunity to pick his brain on the management and running the business." She also spent time doing a business plan, mission, vision and values.

"It was a great transition, hands-on with him and figuring out the things that I wanted to do to move the business forward," she says. "The former owner built this up from a produce stand doing things the same way for many years and that worked very well for him and the customers in this town knew what to expect from Himmel's."



Building on a Strong Base

Elizabeth wanted to see Himmel's grow into something even greater, so she needed to break some of those old molds. She describes her business as being fresh and forward thinking. The company's mission is: "Helping our neighbors build a better, healthier and more beautiful world."

This extends past the basics Himmel's has offered for nearly 50 years. There was an opportunity to bring in something else she had an affinity for: landscaping.

"I wanted to transition from just a garden center to something important to the community," she notes. "Now I have 14 employees and I have a landscape crew."

Pictured: Owner Elizabeth Elliott with her store's newly redesigned logo.

Making changes at a landmark garden center like Himmel's was a risk, but Elizabeth didn't let it hold her back. She feels that with the addition of the landscaping offerings, the business is about 80% new Himmel's and 20% old Himmel's, but notes that customers have been excited and are continuing to come to shop. She estimates 90% customer retention and a good volume of new customers. The old owner has visited twice since retiring and Elizabeth feels he's very supportive of the changes.

She added a website, started social media accounts and is creating new systems to move the company away from the paper-reliant systems of the past.

"I took more risks this spring in bringing in more new and unusual plant material. I believe this is what grew our sales," she says. "Customers appreciated this; they were excited with the volume of different things."

Refreshing & Reconnecting

She also found that people were curious about what was new and different based on an ad in the local paper that detailed Elizabeth's story. Customers came to see the changes and also reconnected with the girl they'd met at Himmel's 20 years before.

The décor section underwent massive changes. No more items found at big box stores. Now, Himmel's offers products from local vendors, like clay pots, wood and copper-crafted creations and handmade items. The store also sold Christmas trees for the first time.

"I was looking at it less to sell what is on trend and more to set the trends," she says. "I couldn't have asked for a better reception from this community."

Freshening things up also included the slight name change and updated logo, as well as new faces, just as she'd been a new face years earlier.



Pictured: Himmel's owner Elizabeth Elliott made sure to hire and train teenagers, recalling her own time as a teen working at the store 20 years before. From left to right: Lea Childress, Nick Rivera, Brendan Quinn, Candice Pung and Natalie Hummer.

"I hired a bunch of teenagers in the spring," she says. "We wanted fresh faces here and we really wanted to give young people an opportunity to get their foot into the industry. It's more than just selling plants. It's about encouraging young people to connect with nature, and connecting friends and neighbors with the Chesapeake Bay."

The Chesapeake Watershed is important to Elizabeth and due to the proximity of the community to the waterway, the business helps support its health. It's a concept she learned in the non-profit world: working for something bigger. The same applies to her approach in hiring youth. She sees this is something bigger in that it's her responsibility to train young people to be good community members.

"Every young person between 15 and 20 years old, when I asked them what they were looking for in a leader, they all said that they wanted someone who would be patient with them and give them the tools they need to succeed," she says. "It's not without challenges, but once they've had an opportunity to learn, they are brilliant and passionate. We give young people an opportunity to shine." **GP**

A writer since she could hold a pen, Ronda Payne is passionate about words. In 2007, she kissed "real jobs" goodbye and began her true occupation as a full-time copywriter, freelancer and storyteller. Ronda joyfully lives in Maple Ridge, B.C., Canada, and can be reached at ronda.eyben@shaw.ca.