

DISCOVER 419

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Ralph's Joy of Living

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Staff Writer

Ralph's Joy of Living isn't just a store. According to owner Ralph Smothers II, it is a destination, a way of life and one of a kind.

The story, and store, began almost 70 years ago when Ralph's father opened Ralph's Maytag in 1950.

"It was Ralph's Maytag when I wasn't even alive and it became Ralph's Appliance when my father sold more than just Maytag and couldn't call it Ralph's Maytag," Smothers said. "But there are a lot of people who still call it Ralph's Maytag, since it's been here since 1950 and that kind of stuck."

Smothers bought the business from his father in 1990, but wanted to sell more than just appliances.

"I got involved in kitchen cabinetry to diversify the business and that was a good idea because people like one-stop-shopping," he said.

After he and his wife Julie were married, he wanted to find a way for her to be involved in the

business.

"Julie used to sell wine in Ontario," he said. "I married a Canadian, and she loves to cook and has a passion for food. As soon as we got married, my wife wanted to work with me, so we decided to expand. We have a store in Fremont as well and she ran that store and I ran this store."

The couple began brainstorming on how they could sell more kitchen cabinetry and appliances and decided to add on to the business.

"I gave her like 20 feet of shelving space in Fremont for her gadgets and things that she likes, cookware and those kind of things," Smothers said. "The whole idea was to sell more kitchens and I thought, 'What if we offered cooking classes?'"

Julie then started offering cooking classes at the Fremont store along with another chef as a way to build relationships with customers. Not only were the classes a big hit, they were selling lots of kitchens.

"It really worked and we found out that people who like to cook like nice kitchens, so we were selling kitchen after kitchen just based off of cooking classes in a town where no one knew

me," Smothers said. "That was when the light bulb went off in my head thinking what works in Fremont where no one knows me, I have to do in my hometown."

Smothers purchased the property located next to his Tiffin store, tore down the buildings that were on it and added 6,000 square feet onto the current 2,000 square foot building. They also added something to completely set them apart from every other appliance store in the nation.

"We became overnight the only appliance store to have a wine and beer license and that's really fun to say, because no one else has a store like this anywhere. It's a true destination," he said.

The latest addition to the business is mattresses. Smothers has been selling Serta brand mattresses for about two years and has already sold more than 250. The funny thing, he says, is that no one has come in to his store looking for a mattress.

"I had a couple that came in for a light bulb for a microwave and then they were giggling on the way out saying, 'We came in for a light bulb and we ended up buying a mattress,'" he said.

According to Smothers, selling mattresses and

Continued on pg. 3

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appliances makes sense. They already had a delivery service and, he said, mattresses just need to be delivered and you're done unlike appliances that can break and need repairs.

"I said to my wife for maybe eight years, we need to do this because we deliver stuff. Of course, being in the appliance business, everything we sell, even though we sell good quality products, they do break," he said. "This is one of the headaches of the appliance business, but in the mattress business you simply deliver it and I just can't get over how wonderful that is. Eat, drink and sleep. That needs to be my new motto."

Smothers isn't done yet. His next project in the works: Ralph's Joy of the Outdoors.

"We have another property on the north side of this store that I own. My goal in the near future is to cut a hole in the wall and walk outside to an outdoor living center," Smothers said. "I'm thinking an outdoor garden with outdoor

the whole story now, but for whatever reason, in the end we had to negotiate and I can't sell cosmetics or perfume and he can't sell cookware, cutlery, gadgets or wine. So, I felt really good about that."

Another big part of Joy of Living is their tagline "Escape from Grouchy." The phrase is posted in big letters outside the store and is even available in T-shirt form.

Smothers says he and Julie came up with the phrase because they wanted something catchy that would reflect the atmosphere they were trying to create.

"The narrative for Nike is 'Just Do It' and it just rolls off of people's tongues. We are working hard to have a brand and have a tagline like Nike. Ours is 'Escape from Grouchy.' We love it," he said.

"In my view, 'Escape from Grouchy' means coming into the store to get away from it all to escape. Everybody is wound up tight with our

offered on the third Thursday in Tiffin and the fourth Thursday and Friday of each month in Fremont.

Food and wine nights are the most popular, but they also recently had a class on knife skills and what each knife is used for.

"We don't even advertise for them, we just invite our customer base and recently we had 89 RSVPs in our Tiffin store and the Fremont store is always sold out, but it is a lot smaller store," Smothers said. "We can get about 30-35 people sitting down in the Tiffin store. We just have to get it on the calendar. We know there's a demand for it."

Those interested in attending a class or learning more can visit Ralph's Joy of Living on Facebook and be added to the email list.

"We're all about customer service. It's all I really know since I've been a kid. People walk in the door and my mother and father, they would never sit behind a desk and wait for people to come to them, they would get off their rear and talk to the customers. It has been bred in me. I try to set a good example for my staff to treat people the way I do.

"Everyone wants a great deal. You've got to be competitive if you want to be in business today, I don't care what you are selling. The reason people love Ralph's is we have a service department. My prices have been very competitive with Lowe's and I'm not trying to knock a box store, but they don't have anybody who can help you or service you if you ever have a problem. Here, we make a living giving service. We service everything we sell and that will never change."

Ralph's Joy of Living in Tiffin is located at 33



fireplaces and fountains and outdoor grills and cabinetry and maybe have an outdoor wine bar, the joy of the outdoors. Stay tuned, but that's coming soon."

After the store became more than just appliances and cabinets, Ralph and Julie wanted the name to reflect their vision.

"People come in from all over to experience the Joy of Living. It's a feel-good store," Smothers said. "We are working on the brand. We love the brand."

Not wanting to risk a legal issue, the couple decided to trademark the store's new name.

"We just love that name 'Ralph's Joy of Living,'" he said. "We own the national trademark for that."

But during that process, Ralph met some resistance from another Ralph.

"A great story: Ralph Lauren actually gave us trouble because he had a future company that didn't exist yet called 'Ralph's American Living.' It's around now, but it wasn't around when we did this. He can afford to trademark everything and mine was Ralph's Joy of Living and his was Ralph's American Living and there was a conflict, but his attorneys let something lapse. I can't remember

jobs and raising kids and putting food on the table and our marriages. People are just stressed out. This is a store where people come, they stop, they smell the coffee, taste the coffee, sip the wine, have a chance to relax a little bit and escape from grouchy. That's how I look at it."

For the coffee lovers, Smothers says they offer some of the freshest coffee in the area.

"We get our coffee out of Brecksville, called Caruso's. It's really top-notch coffee beans," Smothers said. "People from Findlay drive to my store to get their coffee. It's just so fresh. Fresh batches of coffee come in at least once a week. Our coffee is the best in the area, you will find. If you are a coffee drinker, you will definitely become a fan of this place."

For those interested in learning more about cooking, classes are offered, but they can fill up fast. They are



N. Washington St. The Fremont store is located at 113 S. Front St. For more information about either store, visit the website at www.joyofliving.com, like the Facebook page or call 419-447-1051 (Tiffin) or 419-332-1928 (Fremont).