

has not paid off and has descended into a complicated, expensive legal battle. DeLuca lives in Orlando, Florida, with his wife and family. In 1996, he set up the Micro Investment Lending Enterprise (MILE), a non-profit seed funding organization to help entrepreneurs who do not have access to traditional loans. “We were never very sophisticated as business people,” says DeLuca. And look where \$1,000 took him.

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## Mrs. Fields Cookies

“It’s the lack of perfection that drives me crazy”

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**D**EBBI FIELDS WAS JUST TWENTY WHEN SHE HAD HER BIG idea. Recently married and living in Palo Alto, California, she decided she was not cut out to be a housewife for the rest of her life. She had no business qualifications, but she had baked cookies at home since her early teens and figured it was her

only marketable skill. So she decided to open a cookie shop. Success led to global expansion. And the rest is history.

Well, not quite.

Fields, the youngest of five girls born to a welder and a housewife in Oakland, California, grew up with a strong work ethic, working as a foul-ball girl for a baseball team at thirteen, in a department store, and, at seventeen, in a water ski show with the title Miss Marine World. At eighteen, she was at Denver airport on her way home from a ski trip when she met twenty-eight-year-old economist Randy Fields; they married a year later, reportedly after Debbi proposed. Married domesticity was not the be-all and end-all for Debbi, though. She later told a reporter she thought their circle of friends considered her “just a housewife.”

“I knew my disadvantages,” she told *Memphis Magazine* in 1999. “I was young, had no college credentials, came from little means. I was blonde and people figured I had no brains.”

But she was persistent. In 1977, she managed to borrow enough money to start her business. She recalled: “The one thing I had to my name was a Volkswagen Bug, my collateral, and, basically, a dream. But I didn’t care. I knew I would pay back my loan, even if I had to take three jobs.”

At times she has recalled her husband saying her idea was stupid, though she has also claimed it was his support that got her the loan in the first place. “I thought she was loony,” Randy said later. “She’d only been making cookies for my clients in the investment business. Her background was in English and History. She knew nothing about business.” Later Debbi was to say, “The thing that really got me going was when my mom said I would fail.”

Either way, on the day she opened the Mrs. Fields Chocolate Chippery, August 16, 1977, business was so slow that by 3:00 p.m., according to oft-repeated legend, she had not sold a single cookie. So Fields loaded up a tray with cookies and set off down the street, giving them away. It proved a successful strategy—by the end of the

day she had lured customers back to the shop with her freebies and she had made \$75.

Debbi Fields's homestyle, chewy, warm cookie, baked in-store, and her old-fashioned selling technique appealed to customers' nostalgia. Soft cookies were a new market, and the company expanded dramatically. By 1980, there were fifteen stores and headquarters had moved to Park City, Utah. By 1983, she had sixty-three stores. By 1986, husband Randy had quit being a consultant economist to work for her business, which now had 350 stores, bought 10 percent of the world supply of macadamia nuts, and even ran a "cookie college" to train managers (where eating a cookie was referred to as "having a Mrs. Fields experience"). Incredibly, Debbi, now pregnant with her fourth child, still found time to publish her autobiography, *One Smart Cookie*. (She and Randy eventually had five children, all daughters.)

Fields grasped early on that customer service was as important as the product itself. She learned her customers' preferences, remembered their birthdays, and hired staff who could do the same. She later refined her instincts into a three-step hiring process. First, she brought out a plate of cookies and asked the candidate to taste them, so she could judge their enthusiasm for the product. Next, she asked them to take a tray of cookies out onto the street and give them away, which gauged how outgoing they were. Lastly, she asked them to sing "Happy Birthday" in the store: something they would be required to do for customers. She called the process the three S's: sampling, selling, and singing.

Employees were also introduced to the mysterious "Mr. Thumb." Before selling each cookie, they had to squeeze it with their thumb to make sure it was still soft and chewy. Cookies more than two hours old were supposed to be given to charity.

"It's lack of perfection that drives me crazy," Fields once admitted. "The disappointment and frustration are indescribable when I find my cookie standards aren't being met. Perfection in a cookie is

definable.” She was known to drop into stores, throw out whole batches of cookies because they were too crunchy, then demonstrate to the staff how to make them properly.

They floated the company on the UK stock exchange in 1986 but the share price proved volatile, slumping in 1988 after it became apparent the company had expanded too quickly, leading to store closures. In 1993, the company, now with 780 stores, was restructured with four lenders effectively buying 79 percent of the business. Debbi Fields lost control, though agreed to stay on as its public face, finally retiring in 2000.

“That meant basically the bankers took over my business,” she said later. “It was the worst, most devastating experience of my life, because it was like putting my child up for adoption.”

In 1997, she divorced Randy and remarried, to retired company chairman Michael Rose, who also had five children from a previous marriage. No longer involved in the business that bears her name, today she is a keen horse rider and has reinvented herself as a popular speaker on the business seminar circuit, charging \$15,000 an appearance.

## NOTES

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