

Three Layers Coffee House: Sweet success for Jeff Wright and Shawn McGuire

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By Ashley Cisneros

People can't stop talking about Three Layers, A Coffee House. The Springfield business was named the Best



Coffee House of Jacksonville by *Folio Weekly*, gained coverage in *Southern Living*, and garnered a visit from Gov. Charlie Crist. Like many other entrepreneurs, partners Jeff Wright and Shawn McGuire have an interesting story.

The couple moved to Florida from Atlanta in 2007. McGuire was successful in the construction and real estate industries. Wright worked in health care, and made special-order cakes from his home kitchen for more than a decade.

For as long as Wright has been making cakes, people have told him that his cakes were the best they've ever had. Guests have called the hosts of parties where Wright's cakes were served because they wanted to compliment Wright on his cakes. They even sent flowers. Friends and family urged Wright to start a business.

McGuire suggested that Wright name the would-be business. Months later, Wright announced that he would call it Three Layers, A Coffee House. The name represented the three layers he used in every cake he baked and his belief that true inner peace embodies the mind, body and spirit—three layers.

Months after deciding on a name, the opportunity to launch Three Layers presented itself, but it was completely unexpected.

New Floridians

Wright and McGuire moved to Orlando after McGuire was recruited by a real estate firm in Central Florida. But they discovered the city wasn't the right fit for them.

“We started to consider other areas of Florida, and we had a few requirements for our new home,” Wright says. “It had to be a place where Shawn could sell real estate, specifically historic homes. We're urban dwellers, so it had to have an urban core. And it had to be near the water.”

After reviewing city information on the Internet, Wright and McGuire kept reading about the historic Springfield advantagebizmag.com/archives/2403

neighborhood of Jacksonville. After a visit to the active community, they were hooked.

Some locals tried to persuade them not to move to Springfield.

“People told us, ‘Oh, you don’t want to be there,’” Wright says. “The neighborhood was rundown and crime-infested about 10 years ago. But it’s nothing like that now.”

McGuire began searching for offices for his new real estate venture. He found a four-unit building at 1602 Walnut Street. Although he decided it wasn’t suitable for his real estate office, he wanted to show it to Wright because of the unique architecture.

When Wright walked in the 1925 building, tears filled his eyes, McGuire says.

“He turned and told me, ‘This is it. This is where Three Layers is supposed to be,’” McGuire recalls.

The building offered not only a place for a new business, but a place for the couple to live as well.

Their decision was a surprise to both of them. “I remember telling Jeff, ‘A coffee house? But, we’re looking for a place for the real estate business,’ Three Layers wasn’t on our radar at that point,” McGuire says.

But Three Layers was meant to be.

A financial plan

“Starting Three Layers was a new experience for us,” McGuire says. “I’d done construction, restoration, and real estate, but nothing like this before.”

Another entrepreneur gave McGuire a contact at the Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA required McGuire to produce a business plan. He spent three days writing his first business plan using Business Plan Pro software. He used a how-to book about opening a coffee house, and demographic information from the Springfield Preservation & Revitalization (SPAR) Council.

The partners secured a loan from CenterBank of Jacksonville guaranteed by the SBA, and put down \$60,000.

“We did an interest reserve deal. It included \$175,000 to cover the cost of the building, \$50,000 for build-out, \$25,000 to cover our mortgage payments while we got started, plus \$25,000 in equipment start-up costs,” McGuire says. “The interest rate was good, and it all happened pretty fast. If we would have pursued the same loan now that we did back then, the scenario would be very different.”

A budding business

Wright and McGuire worked tirelessly to build Three Layers, A Coffee House, in only a few months. A then-threatening recession presented challenges, but they believed in the vision for the coffee house.

“Shawn had his real estate business, and I was bringing in income from a part-time job at Memorial Hospital,” Wright says. “We lived in the same building of the coffee house, and we didn’t have a mortgage payment thanks to the great deal we received from the SBA. We knew we would have to put in long hours and hard work, but we figured if we can make it in this economic climate, we’d be OK.”

The owners say that their slogan, “Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly,” is not only a foundation for Three Layers, but a personal mantra they live by. Wright received it an e-mail several years ago, and it stuck with him.

The partners conducted guerilla market research by visiting coffee houses each time they traveled to a new city. They studied the corporate giants, networked with local roasters, and researched equipment.

“We asked a lot of questions to find out who was using what equipment, the advantages and disadvantages of using certain products, and what changes the owners would make if they could,” Wright says. “We checked out the prices other owners were charging, too.”

The menu was designed to showcase Wright’s treasured recipes from family and friends. The recipe for Italian Cream cake, Wright’s favorite, came from a friend’s family in Knoxville, Tenn. The cookie recipes originated from Wright’s mother, and his English Muffin Bread recipe came from his father. The partners drew non-compete and confidentiality agreements to protect the recipes. Today, they’re also trademarking and copyrighting the best-selling “Jeff Squares.”

They also found great deals on equipment.

“Sometimes people just gave us things,” Wright says.

The marketing plan was simple. The partners printed fliers and spoke to everyone they met. As people visited the coffee house, word spread quickly, and soon the press began to call. A visit from a local television producer resulted in news coverage.

McGuire says that the first operational plan entailed him opening Three Layers in the morning, tending to the long lines, and closing at 11 a.m. Then, he’d work on his real estate business. Wright would leave his part-time job at 5 p.m. to open the coffee house by 5:30 p.m.

“Well, there just weren’t long lines at the beginning,” McGuire says. “We had a very limited menu in the beginning consisting of cake, coffee and espresso.”

Soon customers were asking for lunch.

Expansion

Wright and McGuire decided to repurpose their guest bedroom to give Wright more room to prepare food. Out came the guest bed, and in went new commercial equipment.

After finding a four-bedroom house, only steps from the coffee house, Wright and McGuire moved out of the building. They turned their old bedroom into a special events room, and opened a wine bar called The Cellar.

They also hired a landscaper to transform their courtyard into a lush Zen Garden featuring reclaimed bricks, drought-tolerant bamboo, and underground water storage ponds. Now, the Zen Garden is reserved at least once a week for birthdays, receptions, book club meetings, and more.

The owners have also given back to the community through events such as the Springfield Autumn Music Festival that benefitted the American Cancer Society and The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

The buzz about Three Layers, A Coffee House, has translated to awards, press coverage, and even a visit from Gov. Charlie Crist.

The governor was in Jacksonville to sign a piece of legislation. When he told his local driver he wanted to go to Starbucks, the driver told him he should try Three Layers.

“Gov. Crist and his entire entourage came to the coffee house,” McGuire says. “We had a guitar player during lunch that day. Gov. Crist borrowed his guitar and played a Beatles song for us.”

Challenges and goals

Wright says it is still a challenge to get some native Jacksonvillians to visit Three Layers, A Coffee House, because of Springfield’s stigma from years ago.

“We actually had some part-time applicants call and cancel their interviews once they looked up the location of the coffee house, or when their family or friends heard that the business was in Springfield,” Wright says.

Positive press coverage and word-of-mouth have helped the owners combat the old reputation of Springfield.

McGuire says that one of the partners’ biggest goals is to implement processes to make the coffee house so systematic, that it can be run easily.

“This will free Jeff and me up to focus on other ventures,” McGuire says.

McGuire calls the success of Three Layers more of a statement than a cause for the neighborhood.

“We thought we’d offer a great place to hang out, but we soon became the flagship business for a neighborhood long forgotten. We proved that, yes, you can start a business in a once horrible neighborhood and succeed.”

Ashley Cisneros is a contributing editor to Jacksonville Advantage. She can be reached at ashleycisneros@gmail.com.

SIDEBAR

Three Layers, A Coffee House

1602 Walnut Street

Jacksonville, FL 32206

(Corner of E. 6th Street and Walnut)

904-355-9791

Hours of Operation

8 a.m. to 10 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday

8 a.m. to 11 .m., Friday and Saturday