

Tom Frainier: Character Wanted!

By Sophie Braccini

When I met Tom Frainier he was wearing a paper hair bonnet that made him look quite friendly and approachable, in spite of his towering height. As CEO, co-owner and "Chief Boot Licker" of Semifreddi's breads (as reads his business card) he runs one of the most successful businesses in the East Bay, in partnership with his brother-in-law. But this Moraga dad is not your traditional successful businessman and there's more than one facet to his portrait.

Frainier joined Semifreddi's, the family business, after interrupting a promising career at the Clorox Co. in 1988. "I am interesting in controlling my own life," he affirms, and being part of a big company, even at the executive level, wasn't giving him that kind of freedom. Now, almost 20 years later, the company has grown to \$10.5M in revenue, 120 employees and 350 grocery accounts.

With his partners, Frainier developed a marketing strategy that uses no advertising dollars but relies on what he calls "gorilla marketing." For years, Frainier wore a "SemiFreddi's" shirt at all times. When he started with the firm as a delivery person, he would randomly give out loaves of Semifreddi's bread to passing motorists. At Halloween, instead of passing out candy, he'd give out bags of Semifreddi's croutons. "You can conquer your customers through word of mouth," believes Frainier. In the early days it was not rare for him to work 90 hours a week. "You need to have high energy to run your own business," explains Frainier, "but I've mellowed down, now I'm like all my managers, I do not work more than 45 hours a week, 30 hours in Emeryville and 10 to 15 at home in Moraga."

In fact, Frainier reduced his hours at Semifreddi's when he took on his second job of being a full time "mom" to his two school age daughters during the school year. He says that he had to work even harder to get that position.

When the mother of his children decided to return to her native England, he decided to seek custody of his daughters. Up to this point it was very rare for a father to obtain custody of his children in Contra Costa. But Frainier did prevail, and though painful on many levels, the situation brought a whole new dimension to his life and a fatherly fulfillment he hadn't anticipated.

Frainier loves taking care of his daughters as he prepares meals, helps

with homework and manages the house with only a minimum of help. This will be his 10th year coaching soccer for LMYA, he volunteers in his daughters' classrooms and often goes on fieldtrips. This is what he calls "his labor of love," and he still has time for his "fabulous girlfriend."

This unique situation has made him a better CEO, he believes. "I see myself more as a mentor than a boss," he declares. "My interest is in having highly motivated employees who wouldn't want to work anywhere else. The key is to treat each person with respect, give them flexibility in their schedule so they can have a balanced life, and provide them with opportunities to learn and grow." This explains the very low turnover rate in his organization and the large number of resumes Semifreddi's receives weekly.

Reflecting on where he is today, Frainier believes that he couldn't have done it without the support of the community he resides within. Local parents have commended him for his daughters' wonderful attitude and he thinks that the teachers at Camino Pablo Elementary in Moraga have had a great impact on their development. "They were all wonderful, M. Adler, Ms. Elliott, Mrs. Scott, Mrs. McCormack, Mrs. Laughland and of course Mr. Jennings, the principal."

This over-achieving father has adopted one of the teacher's motto to raise his girls: "doing your best is always good enough" (Mrs. Laughland, 2nd grade teacher). "I'm very proud to be a Berkeley Alumni, but I won't tell my girls they have to get there, or Stanford, or an Ivy League University. It doesn't matter that much in the long run anyway. I want them to find what they love and see them pursue it with passion. That's what I do, even though it took me a few years to discover what that passion was."

For more information about Semifreddi's, go to www.semifreddis.com.



Tom Frainier, "hands on" in Semifreddi's bakery in Emeryville Photo Sophie Braccini

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