

Brewer's Yeast: Finnegan's Sprouts Spud Society

By Margaret Spence

For most small businesses, philanthropy is, if anything, an afterthought – a luxury that necessarily takes a back seat to employees, vendors, marketing, rent, product development, and the other myriad expenses an owner must cover every month. In the case of Finnegan's, it is a founding principal. President Jacquie Berglund established her beer company with the express purpose of helping others. A full 10% of all gross profits are used to fund Berglund's other creation, the Spud Society, which assists Minnesota's working poor. Her slogan for the potato-based brew: Taste the Difference, Make a Difference.

"I have always had a desire in my own way to leave the world a better place than when I arrived," Berglund says. "I have always had that motivation of wanting to make a difference. The beer idea really just unfolded, but I do think that when we use our gifts and align those with our passions – watch out! Something great is going to happen."

There's nothing in Berglund's background that foretells a career in beer. While she did take a semester abroad in England during her undergraduate years at Augsburg College, the bulk of her time away from Minnesota (1990-1997) has been spent in Paris, where she earned a master's degree in international relations and worked for the Organization of Economic Development and Cooperation. "It was a very social time," she recalls, "but more oriented toward wine."

Back in Minnesota, she began working with Kiernan Folliard as the marketing director for his restaurant/bar, The Local. (He now also owns Kiernan's and The Liffey.) "We got lots of calls for donations, but I felt our efforts were too diffuse," says Berglund. "They didn't make much of an impact for us or for our recipients." She approached Folliard in 2000 with the idea of creating a special brew to fund a more focused philanthropic effort. "Kiernan bought into the idea and we were on our way," she recalls.

Berglund began working with Dave Anderson, the president of James Page brewery, to develop a craft beer with broad appeal. "I was after something with full flavor and light body, amber in color with a creamy finish," she says. "There was a lot of sampling."

Barb Rummel and Rebecca Sandberg of Lindquist and Venum donate legal services to the venture, while Dave Damman and Dean Buckhorn at Fallon contribute award-winning branding and advertising. Mary Kay Bunde, founder of Superior Trek, provides business and life coaching. "I've been really fortunate in that Finnegan's has been able to attract fantastically talented people who are willing to share their talents for a great cause and, when cash flow permits, beer," says Berglund.



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Her greatest challenge to date arose in 2002 when production was moved to Summit, a contract brewer that required Berglund to manage production, inventory, and packaging – all aspects of the business that had been handled by James Page. "The folks at Summit have been very supportive and patient with me, but I'm still green and have so much to learn," she admits. "Invaluable" support from the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce leadership program is credited with helping to identify and address issues and make connections.

Berglund is putting together an advisory council to help her build the brand. The company sold more than 1000 barrels in 2003, and has set a "lofty" goal of 2500 for 2004. Distributors have recently been added in Owatonna, St. Cloud, and Monticello. Sales are aided by one full-time beer salesperson who handles Finnegan's "on the side." Most accounts are with independent restaurant and storeowners. "I can't compete with the majors at the chains," she says. "The independents have been supportive of us, but we're still not profitable. Because I take out that 10% of gross receipts right off the top, our cash flow is really tight. A lot of companies are content to give 2%, but with a larger percentage we're obviously able to have more of an impact."

Among the efforts already funded by the Spud Society are the sponsorship of four students through a scholarship program at Kids First, a truancy prevention program run by Life's Missing Link, and computers for the community room at Park Plaza, a low-income housing development. "The plan is to also provide training so people can use the computers to write résumés and cover letters," says Berglund. "Our focus is helping the working poor to become self-sufficient." A Finnegan's Jazz Festival last October raised another \$5,000 to help furnish apartments for homeless youth.

"I have one of the best jobs in the world, owning my own beer company and giving back to the things I believe in. No other beer company that I am aware of in the world is doing what I'm doing," exclaims Berglund. "If every company committed to giving back to the community, just imagine." **WOM**

Visit the Finnegan's website at www.finnegans.org, or e-mail Berglund at finnegansamber@cs.com.