

Going Through The Change

By Les Lovoy

You're having another "glazed look in front of the open refrigerator" moment at your desk. Your job or career has stalled or come to a complete standstill. Maybe you need more balance in your life. And, you've been bitten by the entrepreneur bug.

Your dream is to own a business, and not just any business. Something that is a complete departure from your current career. Impossible you say. Difficult, maybe. Improbable, could be. Nerve-wracking, certainly. But, not impossible. Stuart McAtee is a perfect example. McAtee practiced corporate law in Birmingham for approximately eight years. His area of concentration was insurance defense litigation. In other words, he defended insurance companies in lawsuits. "I really enjoyed practicing law," McAtee explained. "It was extremely challenging, and I especially liked coming up with creative ways to represent clients, but I was at a point where it was time for a change." That "change" was a calling to start a business.

After considering an array of alternatives, McAtee, with the support of his wife and family, took the plunge into the great unknown. He decided on something that would involve his love of travel and his curiosity and interest in different cultures, his interest in Scottish history, and yes, his affinity for a good drink.

Stuart now imports primarily Scotch whiskey, as well as other liquors under the auspices of McAtee Imports. (www.mcateeimports.com). "I've been doing this for approximately two and a half years, and even though it's very challenging, I love every minute of it," he beams. That is extremely evident, if you've ever heard McAtee talking about his newfound career. "For me it's the perfect job," he says with a big smile. "It's not easy, and it can be frustrating, just like any other business, but right now, I can't think of anything I'd rather be doing."

According to McAtee, a member of the Scotch Malt Whiskey Society, after he decided to start his business, he was a little hesitant about staying in Birmingham. He did not know that this city has everything necessary for the importation and storage of liquor. However, he soon found that Birmingham has a bonded warehouse, a Customs broker and is a Foreign Trade Zone—everything that is necessary to import liquor into the state, and be the middleman between the distillery and the distributor.

“Since 9-11, it’s very difficult to import anything with all of the Homeland Security restrictions,” McAtee explains. “There is a ton of paperwork that has to be completed and filed. Frankly, I don’t see how anyone without a law degree is able to do it.” On the other side of that “all this paperwork is killing me” coin is the Scottish way of doing business. “You have to be very open with them,” McAtee explained. “It’s necessary to go over there, meet with them, and yes, sadly, drink with them,” he says with a bemused smile. “They are very big on handshakes. So, you go to Scotland, and make yourself known, and you can’t be shy.”

Currently, he is importing Scotch under someone else’s label, but he has bigger plans. “Like any other business, you need to find a niche,” he said. “Right now, I’m importing brands that are not readily available in the United States. I want to continue importing brands that are unusual, but I really would like to begin my own brand. That would involve buying Scotch from a distillery, placing his own labels on the bottles and selling it to distributor that would then be sold to various outlets such as restaurants.

Does McAtee miss his old life as an attorney? “I do miss the camaraderie and the litigation,” he explained. “In fact, I’ve just joined Robert F. Lewis, P.C. So, I’m practicing law and importing spirits. Needless to say, I’m having the time of my life.”

For Amy Anderson, it wasn’t a matter of totally changing gears, she needed a little symmetry in her life. Amy is an oncology nurse at the Kirklin Clinic. There she administers chemo to cancer patients. After a number of years, she felt she needed a new challenge. So, she enrolled in nurse practitioner curriculum at UAB. According to Amy, that ‘s when the wheels feel off. She discovered she wasn’t cut out for that at all.

“It was very taxing,” Amy explained. To help blow off some steam and relax, Amy spent a lot of time in coffee houses. “Eventually, I fell in love with the concept of a coffee house,” she said. “People are there because

they want to be there. They're having fun, meeting new friends. It was a real departure from what I was around all day."

Eventually the seed, or the coffee bean began to grow. Amy began the thought process, which would lead to owning her own coffee house, while still practicing nursing. "I wanted something else for a lot of reasons," she explained. Although helping them fight the cancer is rewarding, I really needed more balance. Also, as large as the Kirklin Clinic is, if you're there a lot, the walls start to cave in on you. I needed t to make my world a bigger place."

She began to look for an opportunity. Living in Edgewood area, she enjoyed the convenience of being able to walk to a small, charming shopping and dining area. So, when New York Pizza moved into its new location, dreams and opportunity met at the same intersection. Soon after, she opened Cool Beans, which specializes in fair trade, organic coffees. "The name started as a joke," she explained. "I was just being silly. But, the more I mentioned it to people, the more they liked it, and so I kept the name." Not everyone shared her enthusiasm for opening Cool Beans. When she discussed her idea with her attorneys, consultants, accountants, and CPA no one told her it was a great idea.

None of these naysayers caused Amy to put the brakes on her enthusiasm, to open a coffee shop with a relaxed, inviting atmosphere. Before opening, she asked her neighbors what they would like in "their" coffee shop. And, the results are reflected in the décor, from the original artwork hanging on the walls to the well-played piano resting in the corner.

What surprised her the most about opening a business? Three words. "Taxes, taxes, taxes," she laughed. "I asked my CPA if there was anything we could do to decrease the amount of money I was paying the government. He just chuckled and said, "Amy, as far as the government is concerned, you're no more important than anyone else."

You would think that after spending 20 hours a week at the Kirklin Clinic and 50+ hours at the coffee shop, Amy would be a bundle of nerves. "I've never been happier," she beamed. "I've created something that people enjoy, and I can contribute to society by offering free trade, organic coffees. And, because all this gives me balance, I'm a much calmer, happier, fulfilled person." We all should be so lucky.

Dale Eads created his current business because he had run out of things to do. According to him, “I was bored to tears.” Not that Dale is a slacker. Several years ago, Dale was the sales manager for a very large and successful pharmaceutical company. Once that relationship ran its track, he eventually decided that he wanted to create his own company. He found that there was a pharmaceutical company that was available for sale. He contacted them within 24 hours. After two short weeks of give and take, the company was his.

As is often the case, the next challenge was finding a name. Leaning back in his chair he recalls the story. “I was sitting at my kitchen table at 2 a.m. looking at all types of reference guides for a name,” he said with a smile. “I had a Biblical dictionary and came across the word that is a river that runs through Damascus. It means ‘healing powers.’ At that second, Abana Pharmaceuticals was born. Abana eventually became the fastest growing pharmaceutical company in the U.S. Dale explained that their success was based on providing customers quality pharmaceuticals at a discounted price, and a very well trained, professional sales force.

After several years, the company merged with Jones Medical, a major firm. Why? Dale felt obligated to his shareholders. “If someone is investing in Dale Eads, I cannot possibly do anything intentionally to cause him or her to lose money,” he said, leaning forward to make his point. Following the merger, Dale, who left the company full-time, actively found jobs for each employee who lost theirs in the transition.

This is where Dale was bored to tears. He and his son-in-law, Paul Holley, had been purchasing homes and refurbishing them for a profit. The more they did this, the more they enjoyed the real estate game, and decided to open a business. Enter Abana Realty (www.abanarealty.com). “I named it Abana, because the name stood for exceptional business ethics, a quality product, a trained and experienced sales staff and unparalleled customer service,” Dale explained. Abana entered the market with a flourish. They wanted to offer customers payment options, and embark on an aggressive and dynamic marketing campaign. They ran 500 TV commercials within a two-week period—virtually unheard of for a local firm.

Just as in both pharmaceutical companies he worked for and owned, Dale wanted an experienced, professional sales staff to be the cornerstone of Abana Realty. To this end, each agent that graduates from the Abana real estate school will learn more than how to pass the test to earn a real estate agent license. “We

also teach them how to market, which is essential for any real estate agent to be successful,” Dale noted. “We take this very seriously.” And, he’s not kidding. Any future agent must make a presentation to Dale himself before Abana grants them a certificate. Abana also does background checks on all agents once a year. “These people are coming into your home, he explained. “You want to know that they’re who they say they are.”

In a city, with over 2,000 realtors, Abana has left its mark on the Birmingham realty landscape. They sold \$55 million last year. Currently, 93 agents have their licenses with Abana. By mid-June of next year, they expect to have 150 agents. Abana, which is currently housed in one office in Hoover, is also planning to open offices in other areas.

Yes, Abana is extremely successful. However, Dale and Paul have other things in mind. Their goal is to create the right business model for a successful realty office. “Once we believe that we have that model fleshed out and running smoothly, we want to go to other cities and franchise it,” Dale said. “It’s that constant search for a challenge that gets me out of bed everyday, and why I’m here late most nights.”

Other than following their dreams of owning a business, there is another thing that is common to all three. Each felt that they were able to carry over certain things from their other professional life. Dale feels that no matter what business you’re in, it is absolutely necessary to have a knowledgeable, professional sales staff. “To do their job properly, they have to know their product or service, the market, their competitors, and they must know marketing. These are the traits of a professional sales person, and they are the keys to a successful business.”

Stuart believes that his former life as an attorney has helped him immensely. His training as an attorney has helped him make it through the minefield of legal paperwork, “I have a lot of experience in looking at contracts, and following up on the smallest details,” he said. “It’s also been helpful to have a background on negotiating and dealing with people, which has been a giant asset.”

And, finally, one might think that there is very little cross-pollination of experiences from nursing to owning a coffee shop. “I’ve learned not to sweat the small things,” Amy explained. “You have to prioritize and multi-task.

And, people skills always carry over. Everyone, whether they're a patient or a customer, enjoys the personal touch. That's exactly what we give them at Cool Beans."