

# The Bun Lady

*Cordia Harrington ignored the naysayers, took a risk and built a new life for her children.*

by JENNIFER FRAZIER

**P**eople call Cordia Harrington *The Bun Lady*. And not just behind her back. She's quite fond of the nickname, even strapping on a plastic derriere sometimes during speaking engagements—mainly because buns have made her a millionaire.

Owner of Tennessee Bun Company, as well as Nashville Bun Company, Cold Storage of Nashville and CornerStone Baking Company, Harrington has cornered the market in doughy creations.

The English muffins on an Egg McMuffin at McDonald's? Her company makes them. Those buttery rolls at O'Charley's? Yep, that's her. KFC's biscuits? Those, too. Her companies' clients also include Perkins, Pepperidge Farm and Sheetz. But it's taken this Nashville resident a long time to get where she is.

Harrington was selling real estate on her own, making barely enough to pay the bills. Then a single mom, she bought a McDonald's franchise in hope of offering a better life to her three sons. A poor location in Illinois resulted in low sales but didn't stop her. She purchased a Greyhound bus franchise and changed routes to run past her restaurant. Next, she landed a spot on the restaurant's corporate bun committee. Learning of their need for a bun supplier, she fought like mad (calling regularly and even sending photographs of herself in a chef's uniform) to land the supplier job, even though her résumé included no bakery experience.

When she earned the position, she sold her franchises, cleaned out her bank accounts and borrowed \$13.5 million to create Tennessee Bun Company in 1996. Today, it is one of the fastest automated bakeries in the world, producing 1,000 buns a minute.

As if this weren't enough, Harrington is also active in the community. She's chairman of St. Thomas Health Services Fund, a Circle of Red member for the American Heart Association, and a trustee on the Belmont University Board.



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She has endowed Bun Lady Scholarships, and her company supports the Wounded Warriors Project, as well as 18 houses with the Ronald McDonald Charities.

She recently spoke with *SUCCESS* about her rising career.

## Q&A

**Q: You've taken lots of risks. What advice would you give to other entrepreneurs who need motivation to take that next risky step?**

When I learned about the franchise opportunity with McDonald's, and saw the lifestyle it offered, I was focused on buying my own restaurant. I applied, trained for two years, and in 1990, purchased a McDonald's in Effingham, Ill. I needed to grow sales in this small town, so I purchased a Greyhound franchise and moved it to my restaurant parking lot. It worked. In the winter, we averaged 68 buses a day, and in the summer, over 100 buses a day—all stopping for food.

There are going to be tons of naysayers who will tell us not to take risks. They'll tell us to keep the comfortable job where there is income and insurance. But if you believe in something, then you should go for it. The real key is that you have to have

passion and enthusiasm for the product or project you are going to sell. There's plenty of money available. Money isn't as important as having the focus, the passion and the real belief that this is something good.

**Q: How can someone achieve the type of success you've had?**

I believe that if you really believe in what you are doing, and you believe it will benefit other people, then you'll be successful. Just be totally enthusiastic about it. Stay focused. Stay passionate. The other thing I think is really important is for you to really try and understand your customer. Pick a customer that you believe in. A lot of times when people are starting out, they know who their focused customer is. If they can understand what that customer's needs are, then that will lead to success as well.

**Q: How have you earned such a strong clientele list?**

I will personally call and say, "I'm the Bun Lady, and I want you to have an example of what we do." Then, I'll overnight a box of my products, and once a month I'll just tickle them, call them. Most of the time, when people make a change, it's because they are mad at something. You want to be at the top of mind when they are ready to change. And, persistence pays off. I am living an incredible life right now, and I wouldn't be living it if I had listened the first—or the second or third—time they said no.



**Q: Did you ever feel like giving up?**

Oh, my gosh, yes. And I am sure I will feel that way again. You want it to be easy, but it's never easy. Your job title should not be CEO; it should be Chief Troubleshooting Person on the Planet. I can give you story after story where I thought, *Well, this is the end, and I am watching myself going down the tubes.*

**Q: What would you tell others who are about to give up?**

I firmly believe that we don't learn as much from our good experiences as we do from our challenges. So when

I look back on my life, I see the really rough times and how I had to do things differently, and through that came success.

Look long term and embrace whatever challenge you are going through. In the end, you will learn more and be a better person from it. And I would say to anybody who has a business that they need to have some friend who is at the same level, so when they do feel like they are facing an insurmountable problem, they have someone to talk to. That will give them emotional support as well as some sage advice.

**Q: What would you tell people who are fearful of starting a new business, given the country's recent economic woes?**

I would tell them, if you look at history, there have been 17 recessions and 17 recoveries. We are on our way to recovery right now from this recession. When I look back at my real estate business, my McDonald's franchise, my Greyhound bus franchise, the bakery—I started all of those during an economic dip. So I believe that a recess-



sion is the right time to start a business because there are needs. There aren't as many cushy jobs. There are a lot of customers out there who are in chaos and are willing to change their buying patterns because of what they've just gone through. So it's a wonderful time to offer a new service or product.

**Q: What's the smartest move you ever made with your money?**

When I started a real estate company with my life savings: \$587. I leased my desk for \$3 a month and my chair for \$1.50 a month, and that was the start of everything. My real estate company was what gave me the chance to even be considered for McDonald's.

**Q: What influences or character traits enabled you to dream and think so big?**

My dream was to give my sons a good life. I was passionate, persistent and had enthusiasm. And being resourceful always helps. From a business perspective, my McDonald's training, which stressed quality, service, cleanliness and value, taught me to have the highest quality standards, to take great care of the customer and to focus on continuous improvement. That's been a key to my success.

**Q: What does the future hold?**

Essentially, I hope to be known as The Bun Lady around the world. If you need buns, call me. **S**