

Entrepreneur of the Month

Dennis Burke, South Carolina

Home: Darlington, South Carolina
Businesses: JaCoffa, Krukr
E-mail: dennis.burke@jacoffa.com

Jamaican Roots Inspire Rural Businessman

Dennis Burke grew up in a big, business-oriented family in rural Bath, Jamaica. Living in a valley between two rivers and surrounded by the Blue Mountains, Burke was 8 miles from the beach. His youthful summers were spent reading, working summer jobs on banana plantations, and playing in cane fields.

“I just always saw people working on family businesses – grocery stores, movie theaters, bars, the trucking industry, that was just a part of my life,” he said.

In 1986, at age 17, Burke moved to America and brought his Jamaican business savvy with him. He started at Wendy’s as an assistant manager, eventually working his way up to director of operations 20 years later. Along the way, he earned a BS in workforce education and development and an MBA with emphasis in management. He used his background and education to open several businesses of his own, including JaCoffa -- an online Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee import and distribution business, and Krukr Specialty -- a health food concept that retails natural and organic foods, healthy supplements and Jamaican herbs and spices..

Burke is also a family man, with a wife and three daughters, and an author.

He credits much of his success to his cultural roots and the lessons he learned from his family.

“What did my grandparents know that made them wealthy? They didn’t have much of formal education,” he added. “They understood assets and liabilities. Achieving true wealth is about sowing and reaping. The more seeds you sow, the more you reap.”

Sharing a Premium Cup of Joe

Burke’s job at Wendy’s is demanding, but he couldn’t resist starting another business that literally brought back some of his Jamaican heritage to America, in the form of coffee.

He began drinking coffee at age 3.

“In Jamaica, I would go up beside my aunt at the table and take a sip of her coffee,” he said.

But back in America as an adult, he could never match the richness of those cups in Jamaica. After visiting his home country one time, Burke brought back some Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee for some friends to try. They immediately encouraged him to bring it to the U.S.

Through the eastern end of the tiny Caribbean island of Jamaica runs a majestic range known as the Blue Mountains. According to Burke’s website, legend states that a single coffee plant was brought over from the French King’s own palace garden in the 1600s. After that, the coffee harvest flourished in the lush tropical climate of the Jamaican highlands.

Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee is still a relatively rare product in the United States. Only 10 percent of Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee was exported to North America in 2003. By comparison, 85 percent was exported to Japan.

According to the Coffee Industry Board of Jamaica (CIBOJ), the global export market for Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee was \$574 million in 2003. Of this amount, the U.S. accounted for \$28.7 million. World market prices for Blue Mountain Coffee can reach \$40-\$50 per pound. In comparison, typical gourmet, rare origin and estate coffees generally retail at prices nearing \$10 per pound.

To market and distribute this gem in the U.S., Burke turned to the South Carolina Export Consortium for help.

“When I first sat down with them they cautioned me not to get my hopes up since most businesses like this don’t go anywhere,” Burke said. “But after they did preliminary research, they called back and said, ‘You have to do this.’”

Started in 1997, the Consortium is a nonprofit group affiliated with the University of South Carolina’s Moore School of Business. In its first decade, the Consortium has assisted more than 600 clients increase competitiveness in the global marketplace. They provide a range of expertise, from global market identification and export strategy development, to sourcing and import assistance, to negotiation of distribution contracts. The Consortium specializes in customized training designed to minimize risk and maximize revenues.

For Burke’s foray into the coffee business in 2004, the Consortium helped him with marketing materials, his website and logo, FDA regulations, the import process, labeling, market analysis, distribution and pricing strategy.

Today, Burke’s Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee is primarily sold at his website, <http://www.jacoffa.com>. Customers can order ground or whole bean coffee in quantities ranging from 1.5 ounces to 5 pounds. At \$29.16 per pound, it’s not your average java. But on Burke’s website, he compares 14 other Blue Mountain Coffee distributors in the U.S., averaging the cost of Blue Mountain at \$36 per pound, ranging from his price to \$49.90 per pound. The comparison was from 2004, but Burke said he is not in the coffee business to make money.

“The premise of JaCoffa is simply to bring authentic Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee to customers in the U.S. so they can enjoy it. Every person deserves to experience a good cup of coffee once in their life,” Burke said. “This business could probably grow, but we haven’t put a lot of effort in promoting it.”

Burke added that he’s had orders from all over the U.S., and the world. About 60 percent of his business is retail consumers, but he does get wholesale orders as well.

And he said he could not have started JaCoffa without the help of the Export Consortium.

“I wouldn’t have been able to afford the services provided by the Consortium if I went to the private sector for help,” Burke added. “By actually researching and compiling the market research, then providing a venue for its presentation, a clear message was sent to potential investors that a business opportunity may be evolving. This allowed us to select investors rather than search for them.

“The Consortium had tremendous expertise and knowledge, and they validated the idea.”

Pursuing His Purpose

In addition to his Wendy’s work and the coffee business, Burke also opened an organic and natural foods store with his sister and his wife.

Krukr – a family name for Burke, meaning “obedience” -- is a specialty grocery selling natural and organic foods, healthy supplements, natural products and Jamaican herbs and spices. The store is in downtown Darlington, South Carolina, population approximately 6,500. Best known for Darlington Raceway, home to an annual NASCAR race, the town is a quaint city in northeastern South Carolina.

Burke is happy to live near Darlington, in rural Florence, South Carolina. On his land, Burke raises goats and sells the meat at Krukr.

“I have lived in the city, and without a doubt I am certain that rural America is the place where I am supposed to be at this time,” he said. “The first week I spent in rural South Carolina was the first time I really enjoyed a full day. I would wake up at the break of dawn and wave to people passing by and, amazingly, they responded. In the country, days seem longer. I love working around our rural home and in nature because I am able to grow spiritually and watch my children grown in their own private space.”

He helped launch Krukr not out of business objectives, but out of a commitment to community.

“The object of the store is to provide access to healthy, organic and natural food products to the people of this small town,” he said. “We provide access to healthy alternatives for people of all income ranges in the area.”

Burke was motivated to open Krukr after watching his older brother overcome a life-threatening illness by seeing an herbalist and changing his diet to include organic foods and more vegetables and herbs.

“My passion is people,” Burke said. “If we can help you to maximize your health, you will support the business. Health is primary, and we want a health community.”

At his Wendy’s job, Burke said he excelled not only because of his focus on hard work, but also because he takes time to help others learn, develop and grow in their own careers.

“The more people I help, the more I grow, because my success is intricately related to how much other people trust me to lead them,” he added.

Burke places high emphasis on the importance of community, a value often overlooked.

“When I first came to America, I saw how individualistic people are taught to be in this country,” he said. “Everyone is taught to compete. But I believe that healthy competition means we all win. If you win and I win, the community wins and we all are better.”

Burke brought his collective ideals from Jamaica, combined them with his strong faith, and made them work in business.

He also stresses the value of pursuing your purpose.

Burke is also an avid writer. Writing with the pseudonym Jamaica Mann, Burke has authored a book titled *WENG: the Attitude of Growth after Intellectual Failure*. In this book, Burke uses personal anecdotes to validate the values of personal introspection and discipline in our lives. While passionate about education, Burke acknowledges in the book that education does not equal success. He emphasizes that growth is always working beyond observable limits and experience is never the limit of the future.

“If you look around, you will see that everything in the universe conspires to help you achieve your objective whenever you get hungry enough to pursue it,” Burke said.

He added that he does not waste time watching TV or doing anything that won’t help him to achieve his goals. Even with a 10- to 12-hour day at Wendy’s under his belt, Burke still finds time to spend with his family, teach college business courses, work at Krukr and write. He plans to revisit an unpublished “managerial conversation” with himself, and he’s also working on a collection of poetry with his daughters and older sister.

He said, “When you’re pursuing your design destiny, nothing seems like too much work.”

-By Lisa Bauer, 02/08

For more information on...

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to <http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org>

... JaCoffa, go to <http://www.jacoffa.com>

... the South Carolina Export Consortium, go to <http://www.exportconsortium.com>

... *WENG: The attitude of Growth After Intellectual Failure*, go to your local bookseller or online at Amazon.com or other e-bookstores.