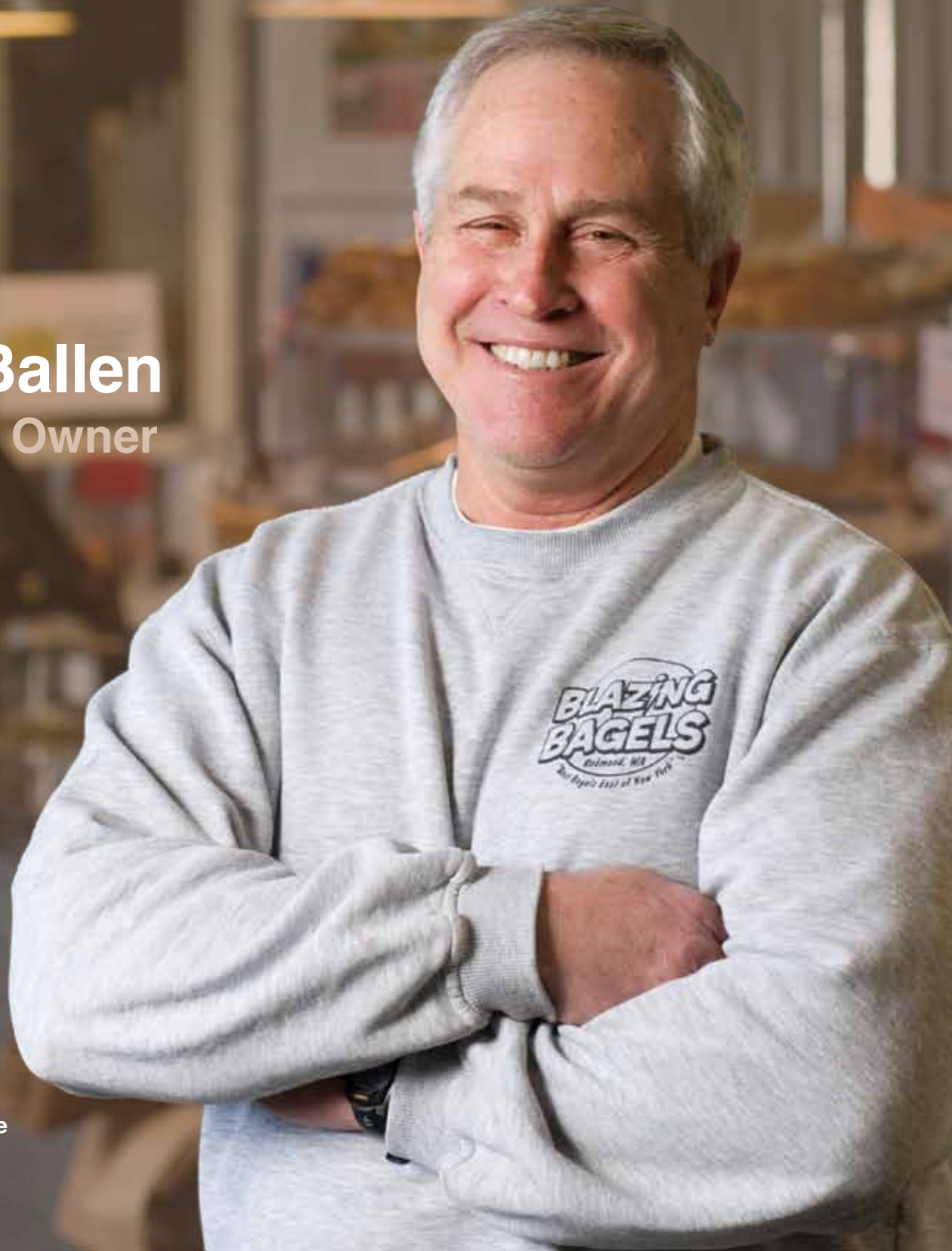


The Power of One Entrepreneur

Dennis Ballen
Bagel Shop Owner



A Publication of
The Institute for Justice
July 2010

As Dennis Ballen proves every day, the power of one entrepreneur exists in the unbridled ability of individuals acting in their own interest to positively impact others.



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Introduction

Overcoming struggles, managing crises and inspiring youth are all in a day's work for Dennis Ballen, who exemplifies the power of one entrepreneur.

The lively, energetic 56-year old father of two from Redmond, Wash., is the owner and founder of Blazing Bagels. After being laid off from his job in office supply sales, Dennis took a single homemade cart and some bagels and turned them into a thriving company that now has three locations, employs 50 people and operates nearly around the clock producing bagels (from plain to pizza-flavored), baked goods and sandwiches not only for his retail locations, but also for wholesale clients like Whole Foods and PCC Natural Markets.

The PO

A photograph of a middle-aged man with short, light-colored hair, smiling broadly. He is wearing a grey crew-neck sweatshirt. On the left chest of the sweatshirt is a logo for 'Blazing Bagels' which includes the text 'Blazing Bagels', 'Edmond, WA', and 'The People East of New York'. The background is a blurred bakery interior with shelves and a menu board.

Dennis Ballen
Bagel Shop Owner

Written by
Booker Stallworth

Photographs by
Ron Wurzer

1

POWER OF ONE Entrepreneur

Blazing Bagels sells 29 varieties of bagels made with no artificial ingredients and prides itself on traditional Jewish deli products reminiscent of New York. Open seven days a week and most holidays too, Blazing Bagels has a devoted following that draws customers to Redmond from all over the Northwest, and it has a reputation that goes from coast to coast.

As this report documents, through his entrepreneurship, Dennis improves the lives of people around him and his community as a whole. From providing employment to helping raise money for numerous charities to teaching young people about what it takes to be an entrepreneur, Dennis dedicates himself and his business to transforming not only his own life, but the lives of so many others he encounters.

To accomplish this, Dennis has made great personal sacrifices, adjusted to recessions and government regulations, and even took on the city of Redmond in a lawsuit that would help to set an important free speech precedent in federal court, thereby making it easier for small businesses nationwide to truthfully promote their enterprises to consumers.

Blazing Bagels has fared better than a lot of other businesses in this recession. “Our weekday business is down a teeny bit, but weekend business is up,” Ballen noted in late 2009. “Our business has actually gone up by 27 percent since this time last year.”

Today, Dennis not only provides much-needed employment in one of the few businesses growing despite the recession, but he also serves as a source of inspiration for almost everyone he comes in contact with—from employees to students to other struggling entrepreneurs trying to make ends meet.

It has not been easy, but for Dennis it has all been worth it.

“I begin making deliveries at 4:30 a.m.; it is a hard life,” said Ballen. “I typically don’t get a day off, and even when I do, I usually spend that time thinking about the business, looking into future sites or scouting the competition; my family never sees me. It’s work, work, work all the time, but the business has allowed me to do some good things.”

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And for Dennis, that is what matters most.

Dennis Ballen epitomizes the power of one entrepreneur to create, serve and inspire. With three shops currently open, and more planned for the future, Blazing Bagels is on the edge of doubling its production with the acquisition of new corporate and retail clients. It is a success story that has only just begun.

This is the story of one entrepreneur's journey from being yet-another victim of corporate lay-offs to a hero of his community, but it is a story that could be told by entrepreneurs just like Dennis Ballen all over the country. At a time when more and more workers at large corporations are finding themselves likewise suddenly out of work, the need for entrepreneurs and the jobs they create are more crucial than ever. As this report demonstrates, the impact of one entrepreneur can be broad and deep, especially when he is freed from the burdens and constraints of local, state and federal governments.

Entrepreneurship becomes more crucial to the economy as a second career for individuals who find themselves suddenly without a job and must reinvent themselves in order to provide for themselves and their families.

Why Entrepreneurship?

There are several reasons why people start a business. Two of the most common are to be independent—and therefore have more control over their own destiny—and the desire to earn potentially unlimited income. Other reasons include the desire to use their creativity, to build a family legacy to pass on and to avoid the fear of ever being laid off or fired by an employer.¹

4

Given the current state of the economy, the fear of being laid off is a critical factor in many people turning to entrepreneurship and the jobs entrepreneurs create.

Nationally, the unemployment rate has hit double digits for the first time since 1983—and, according to experts, is likely to go higher. The 10.2 percent jobless rate—reflecting nearly 16 million jobless people—is the result of job losses occurring across nearly every sector of the economy, from manufacturing and construction to retail and finance. Economists say the unemployment rate could exceed 10.5 percent as larger employers resist hiring more employees.²

Even in high-tech areas, such as Redmond, the recession has led to unprecedented layoffs and closures. Redmond is a center of technology and the location for a number of nationally known high-tech and biomedical companies. Among these are Microsoft, Nintendo, AT&T and Physio-Control. Near-by Boeing is also one of the region's largest employers. Many of these corporations are now, or soon will be, laying off large numbers of workers.

Redmond's largest employer, Microsoft, laid off workers for the first time in its history, permanently pink-slipping more than 2,100 full-time employees since January 2009. Boeing laid off more than 3,200 workers in Washington since February 2009, and Redmond has seen permanent closures by major employers like BD Diagnostics, TTM Technologies, Group Health and Benchmark Electronics.³

Entrepreneurship becomes more crucial to the economy as a second career for individuals who find themselves suddenly without a job and must reinvent themselves in order to provide for themselves and their families. In this way, individuals' optimism and creativity can overcome stultifying despair and defeatism. The opportunities created by entrepreneurs provide much-needed





jobs not only for the entrepreneurs themselves, but for those who find themselves unemployed and without the resources, creativity or inclination to start a business of their own.

Small businesses entrepreneurs play a particularly important role. Small business employers represent more than 99 percent of all employers, provide 60 to 80 percent of the net new jobs annually and represent the largest opportunity for economic growth.⁴

They also account for 52.6 percent of all retail sales, 46.8 percent of all wholesale sales and 24.8 percent of all manufacturing sales.⁵ Small businesses represent 99.7 percent of all employer firms, employ half of all private sector employees and pay 45 percent of total U.S. private payroll. These crucial employers have created more than 50 percent of nonfarm private gross domestic product.⁶

Entrepreneurs like Dennis Ballen are critical to our economy and to reviving the sparse job market. Their ability to overcome challenges, adjust to new circumstances and market realities and apply creative new solutions to common problems make them the ideal vessel for recovery. It turns out that the power of one entrepreneur, which is born of the American love of freedom and opportunity, is still key to the success and prosperity of America.

Dennis' Path to Entrepreneurship

As with many workers today, it was sudden, unexpected bad news that set Dennis Ballen down the path to a new life as an entrepreneur. At the time, he worked for Eastman, Inc., an office supply company in Los Angeles. It was worth \$30 million when he started and worth \$600 million 23 years later, when it was sold to Office Depot.

Dennis was trained there by the best of the best in “old school sales,” he says. “One sales manager once told me that you never go into the company lunchroom,” recounts Ballen. “You can’t make money in the lunchroom.”

When he left the company, he relocated to Seattle and continued to sell office supplies, becoming a regional sales manager for BASF, a German company that sold magnetic tape for mainframe computers, video tapes and other purposes.

On January 2, 2000, he was called into the office and told the bad news: On January 3, all 87 American employees would be out of a job. “I worked for BASF for eight years selling computer tape, and then one day we all got laid off. I learned right there that you just don’t know when you are going to be out of a job.”

This pivotal moment in Dennis’ life could have permanently devastated him, but like many people with the entrepreneurial spirit, he remained positive and determined.

“I have always been a positive person,” he said. “If I get fired from one job, I always believed I was good enough to find another.”

Dennis looked on the shocking news as an opportunity to revisit an idea from his earliest days in sales. “I sold office supplies for 23 years of my life, starting right after college,” he recalled. “I would go on sales calls and see these college kids with the blue Igloo cartons full of bagels, selling them to folks during their lunch hours.”

Ever since he was in junior high school, Dennis had a hobby of investigating small businesses as if he were going to start one. He would plan them out on paper, draw up designs, even potential advertising ideas, but never do anything with them.

He approached a bagel shop owner and did the math, realizing that he could make \$200,000 a year with 20 workers. Having grown up with a love for bagels and the East Coast Jewish culture—which he saw transplanted in California—Dennis thought that should he ever be out of a job, this would be the first business he would try.

So on the very next day after getting laid off, he started Blazing Bagels.

He recalled, “I remember saying to myself the very next day, ‘I want to do that bagel business!’ I figured I would try this idea I had seen 20 years earlier.”

He went to a local bagel shop and told them his idea to go business to business, selling bagels. Redmond is a very high-tech area, so Dennis got started by visiting one of the area’s many industrial office parks.

He recalled that very first day, “I went to nine businesses, and talked to the secretaries, asking them ‘What is your favorite bagel?’ Then I would ask, ‘What is your favorite flavor of cream cheese?’

Then I pulled both out. I'd cut the bagel and put her favorite cream cheese on it, and you could see it—I had just made her day.”

He would then ask the secretary whom he needed to talk to in order to sell bagels at the company. It worked like a charm. His years of sales experience had paid off. Dennis went to nine companies that same day, and by the end of the day had six of the nine companies wanting to use his services the very next day.

“I went home that day and made a cart out of some scrap wood and wire baskets, and I ordered 100 bagels from a local bakery,” he said.

At the first company he arrived at, they announced over the intercom that Blazing Bagels was in the kitchen. Before Dennis could even make his way there, there was already a line of 35 people.

“I was scared out of my mind,” Dennis remembers. “I had two more stops that morning to the bagel shop to restock. I called that my route business and it just took off. Within a week, I had hired Maureen, an older British lady that took over my original route, so I could start creating a new one. Within two weeks, I added Gloria, and then Luanna



Today Blazing Bagels sells more than 7,000 bagels per day, including distribution to several major national food retailers . . . and it is now the largest seller of gourmet bagels in Western Washington.

Marshal. Within a month, I was selling up to 400 bagels a day to employees at different companies.”

Each morning, Dennis would pick up bagels at 6 a.m. and sort them in the back of a van. He supplied 65 major East Side tech companies, including AT&T Wireless and T-Mobile.

He soon added muffins, cookies and small sandwiches. By the time business got up to 800 bagels a day, he had nine routes and was renting a small space for \$100 a month.

Within one year, he had seven employees.

But just when his business was starting to take shape, he ran into his first major obstacle. His bagel suppliers kept changing ownership, and he did not like the quality of bagels he was finding. One of the final straws was when he needed lox cream cheese and his supplier asked, “What’s lox?” Dennis soon found himself at risk of losing his business to poor quality and too many suppliers who were not able to supply him with what his growing customer base was looking for.

“I asked one guy for cheese bagels and he said, ‘Why would anyone want a cheese bagel?’ How about because that’s what my customers wanted,” Dennis recalled. “That made me mad. I was his customer, willing to provide him with a steady order if he could just give me what I wanted and not argue with me. I decided right then and there to make my own bagels.”

Dennis chose an old muffin warehouse for a location. It had all of the infrastructure for ovens, and was already zoned for baking. The route business started to die off and became too costly. Paying people to go out for four hours a day to sell 100 bagels was just not profitable. So he kept adapting. He started using an “honor box” at 14 companies, and when that failed to be cost-effective he refocused on wholesale.

Today Blazing Bagels sells more than 7,000 bagels per day, including distribution to several major national food retailers, such as PCC Natural Markets, Whole Foods, Marriot, Hyatt, several of the regional hospitals, numerous high schools stores and a variety of other outlets. In fact, 67 percent of Blazing Bagel’s diverse business is wholesale, and it is now the largest seller of gourmet bagels in Western Washington.

“The guy that didn’t want to make the cheese bagels has now lost most of his business to us,” Dennis pointed out. “A lot of businesses have failed, but our sales are up 27 percent over this time last year.”

The Government vs. The Entrepreneur

One of the big challenges for any employer is keeping employees happy.

But that is nothing compared to keeping government happy.

Dealing with government paperwork and costs is one of the hardest things for small business owners to do.

Due to an irresponsible employee, Dennis missed a deadline for unemployment insurance taxes by one day. The very next day, he paid it, but it was too late. A state official informed him that because he had missed the deadline, he was now in the “penalty phase.” This meant not only penalties, but also a hike in his rates. “Because I missed the deadline by one day, my quarterly unemployment insurance payment jumped from \$850 to \$4,500,” Dennis said.

“If you couldn’t afford to pay \$850, what makes them think that you can afford \$4,500? It’s insane.”

Blazing Bagels hasn’t missed a payment again, but in order to fix the situation, it has had to pay an extra \$500 a month for the past five years. That’s money that could have gone toward hiring a new employee, paying for a new oven, or leasing more space to expand his business, make more and contribute more overall in taxes.

Washington’s business and occupation tax is another burden on small and growing businesses. It is one of the highest taxes in the nation, and Washington is one of the only states to make business owners pay taxes on their gross income, even if they lose money.

Then there are all the state guidelines. Businesses such as Blazing Bagels that are in both the retail and wholesale food market must meet the requirements of the Department of Labor and Industries, the Department of Licensing, the Department of Health, the King County Department of Health, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Ecology, the state Human Rights Commission and the Department of Revenue. The Department of Labor and Industries alone has thousands of pages of regulations regarding hiring, workers compensation, workplace rights and unemployment insurance.

The regulatory burden at all levels of government is one of the major challenges facing entrepreneurs like Dennis Ballen. Small businesses like Blazing Bagels spend more per employee than larger firms to comply with federal regulations, such as tax compliance regulations.⁷

Blazing Bagels has several government agencies and regulations it must please. The Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and numerous state agencies all have different rules than the Department of Health. The FDA has a separate set of rules, and sometimes the rules conflict or simply do not make sense. For example, the state and federal Departments of Agriculture establish rules that govern wholesale food products. They require hairnets, aprons and special light bulbs in food preparation areas. The Department of

Cost of Federal Regulations by Firm size, All Business Sectors (Dollars)

Type of Regulation	All Firms	Cost per Employee for Firms with:		
		< 20 Employees	20-499 Employees	500+ Employees
All Federal Regulation	\$5,633	\$7,647	\$5,411	\$5,282
Economic	\$ 922	\$ 920	\$1,051	\$ 841
Workplace	\$1,249	\$3,296	\$1,040	\$ 710
Tax Compliance	\$ 894	\$1,304	\$ 948	\$ 780

Source: W. Mark Crain, *The Impact of Federal Regulations on Small Firms*, www.sba.gov/advo/research/rs264tot.pdf, September 2005. Information courtesy of the Small Business Administration, Office of Advocacy.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue vest over a dark shirt, is looking down at a white document she is holding. She is in a kitchen or bakery setting, with a tray of golden-brown bagels visible in the foreground. The background is slightly blurred, showing kitchen equipment and a metal rack with white paper.

Small businesses like Blazing Bagels spend 45 percent more per employee than larger firms to comply with federal regulations.

Health, however, governs retail food areas. It permits ball caps and jewelry and doesn't require food products to be kept under any special lighting. The problem is that the bagels for retail and wholesale are prepared together, and often move between the wholesale area and the retail area. While the Department of Labor and Industries requires workers to be well hydrated, the other state agencies require that there be no drinking water near food preparation areas.

To further complicate matters for Blazing Bagels, the FDA has assigned a new inspector to the shop. Since September 11, 2001, the agency has had concerns about points of origin for food products. The new inspector has requested Dennis provide her with documents demonstrating where all of the products he uses in his shop originate. If Dennis uses a muffin mix from Costco, he is required to show where the flour and other ingredients in the mix came from. Dennis' answer is to "go ask Costco!"

In addition to dealing with the complexities of running their own business, entrepreneurs like Dennis must be up on this myriad of regulatory complexities or some agency representative could walk in one day and shut down their business.

State policy is increasing the cost of business even more. Unemployment insurance and workers' compensation taxes remain some of the biggest challenges to entrepreneurship. As Boeing prepares to leave Washington for friendlier business climates, the state announced recently that it will once again raise workers' compensation taxes, which are already among the highest nationwide.

Adding to state and federal regulations, the burden presented by local governments, like the city of Redmond, can often be just as crippling to a growing new business.

Plain

Plain

Dennis Takes on City Hall

Although Blazing Bagels has overcome numerous challenges and been generally successful, it may not have been so if Ballen had not also built up a successful retail business. That first day of retail, Blazing Bagels did \$300 in sales. Today, it clears about \$2,000 to \$3,000 per day from its retail business alone.

Dennis never intended to do retail at first, which is why he chose to locate in an industrial park that was away from the main road traffic. He soon saw, however, the interest in people wanting to find his bagels. Key to building up that retail business was making sure people could find his business.

Dennis needed to get the word out about his bagels but, like many small business owners, did not have the money to advertise on radio or television. So, on most weekday mornings, commuters driving past the corner of Northeast 70th Street and Redmond Way Northeast in Redmond could see a Blazing Bagels employee wearing a sign that read “Fresh Bagels—Now Open.” Because Blazing Bagels is tucked away off of Redmond Way, Ballen relied heavily on this sign to attract customers. But the city of Redmond sought to force Dennis to remove his sign on merely esthetic grounds even though similar signs were allowed for realtors and politicians.

Dennis said, “We hired a guy named Dancing Dan, or the Human Directional, as he called himself. He would hold up our sign and play air guitar, and point people over from the main road to our shop. Dan and some of the other people we hired to hold signs are what are called ‘hard to hire’—they are people who don’t easily fit into the system, or don’t want to fit into the system.”

Dancing Dan was typical of many people one sees doing that kind of work. He could not have been hired by many other places. Jeff—another sign holder—was a former Marine who had a very quirky personality, and was very different. “I’m not sure he would have wanted to do a regular 9-5 job,” said Ballen.

Dancing Dan’s wife sent a letter to the *Seattle Times* about what a great job Dan was doing attracting attention to the business. This caught the attention of a reporter at the *Times* that was already working on a story about a pizza shop in Portland, Oregon that was giving homeless people and other hard-to-hires pizza in exchange for holding a street sign for an hour.

It was going to be a small article about how Blazing Bagels had hired one of these hard-to-hire folks and given them a regular paying job. Dennis recalled what happened next: “The day before I was supposed to meet with the reporter the sign police from the city of Redmond came by and told me that I could no longer have a sign holder directing traffic to my shop. She gave me a cease-and-desist order that warned me I would face one year in jail or up to \$5,000 in fines for not removing him.”

Sesame

Onion

Garlic

“She gave me a cease-and-desist order that warned me I would face one year in jail or up to \$5,000 in fines for not removing the sign holder,” Dennis said.





My dollar bill from the City of Redmond

“I called the *Times* reporter just to cancel the appointment,” he said. “The reporter told me that my freedom of speech had been taken away. And then it hit me. That little story she was about to write had just become a big story.”

“That is when the Institute for Justice stepped in,” Ballen said. “I got a call from Bill Maurer, an attorney at the Institute for Justice (IJ). He told me that IJ had just opened up a Seattle office, and he wanted me to be one of their first clients. In fact, he told me that IJ was willing to stand with me and fight for my constitutional rights, all the way to the Supreme Court. And all free of charge.”

Ballen sued the city of Redmond for one dollar and demanded the city end its violation of Dennis’ free speech rights. With the help of IJ, Ballen fought for his right to advertise for his small business, and he won. No longer would politicians and the real estate industry be the only ones allowed to use portable signs—a cost-effective and vital means for small businesses like Dennis to communicate with potential customers. That important precedent has helped other entrepreneurs in the region promote their own businesses in similar ways, including entrepreneurs

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like John DeRaspe, whose futon business, with IJ's help, fought off efforts by the city of Lynnwood to halt his portable advertising. Now, entrepreneurs in Washington can let the public know the location of their business and what's for sale there—basic and effective commercial communication that is especially important to small businesses in these tough economic times.

Demonstrating just some of the transformational power each entrepreneur holds to improve the lives and lot of those around them, Dennis' willingness to stand up for his rights vindicated not only important First Amendment principles for commercial speech, but also enabled him and others to continue hiring the hard-to-hire, in Dennis' case as either sign holders or as workers in his Blazing Bagels bakery.

Such people have the hardest time realizing their share of the American Dream or even obtaining a basic level of employment. They often include people with disabilities, ex-offenders and older workers with few options. One of those was Jeff, a sign holder hired by Blazing Bagels. According to Dennis, "He lives in a tent down by the river. I would see him walking and he always seemed like he had a lot of personality. I told him if he ever wanted a job to give me a call. I gave him my card. Then I didn't hear from him for two years. Then one day, he came in out of the blue with the card in hand. We hired him on the spot and paid him \$10 an hour. We were able to offer him a place to sleep and put his bike." Such opportunities may seem small to some, but when they help a person achieve the first rung on the ladder to a better life, or experience a courtesy that can be a rarity, such small matters can have a larger impact. They can turn around someone's day. Without the giver knowing, they can turn around someone's life.

DELI MENU
INCLUDING BAKED GOODS
AND CATERING SELECTIONS



- 100% WHOLE**
BAGELS
SO MANY BAGELS, SO LITTLE BASIC BAGELS
- Even though there's nothing basic about our bagels, we have a few basics for you.
- Plain
 - Onion
 - Sesame
 - Garlic
 - Everything
 - Poppy
 - Salt
 - Jalapeno
 - Pesto
 - Rosemary
 - Sundried Tomato
 - New York Rye
 - Pumpkinseed
 - 9-Grain Whole
 - Cinnamon Raisin
 - Blueberry
 - Cinnamon Chip
 - French Toast
 - Cranberry Orange
 - Snicker Doodle
 - Chocolate Chip
- SEASONAL BAGELS, TOO**
CHEESY BAGELS
- Pizza
 - Asiago Cheese
 - Jalapeno Pepper Jack Cheese
 - "The Chevy" An Everything with Cheddar cheese
 - Pizza Bagel with Pepperoni
 - Cheddar Cheese
 - Bacon Cheddar
- Costs a little more than the other cheesy bagels.

- THE BLAZING BAGELS BAKER'S DOZEN**
We have a new meaning to Baker's Dozen. It's simple, buy six bagels, get one free. Buy twelve bagels, get two free.
- SCHMEARS**
(shmeears) The act of spreading a bagel with cream cheese.
- We make our own cream cheese. Means NO UGLY STUFF IN IT - Au Naturelle, clear from bug killers and any funny numbered ingredients.
- Plain
 - Lite Plain
 - Jalapeno
 - Berry
 - Bacon Horseradish
 - Honey Raisin Walnut
 - Spinach Artichoke
 - Chive
 - French Onion
 - Sundried Tomato
 - Veggie
 - Lox (Salmon)
 - Garlic Herb
 - Cranberry (Overstuffed)

BREAKFAST SANDWICHES
You choose the bagel and we make the sandwich...

- Egg and Sausage
- Egg, Cheese and Veggies

BREAKFAST SANDWICHES
You choose the bagel and we make the sandwich...

- Egg and Sausage
- Egg, Cheese and Veggies

Impact on the Local Economy and Bagel Lovers

Able to once again promote his business with a portable sign, Dennis Ballen has turned his small bagel business into a thriving and vital part of the Redmond economy.

"We have been able to do a lot by being smart or lucky and adjusting to the times," said Ballen. "While a lot of businesses, including many bagel shops, have gone out of business or reduced staff because of the recession, we have seen a 27 percent growth in income over the past year, and have been able to jump from 19 to 50 employees."

Blazing Bagels has continued to grow and has established a reputation that has drawn people to the area from all over the state.

"They come here on the weekends because they love the bagels they get during the work week," said Ballen. "They beg us to open up new locations in their town. But for right now, they have to come here. And when they do, they shop and buy other things in Redmond as well."

Customer reviews and comments tell an impressive tale.

Dean, a local online reviewer and Blazing Bagels customer writes:

"I'm from N.Y. and lived a few years in L.A. and bagels are a part of my life. When I moved to Seattle, I missed many things, but the bagels I missed the most. When I was at Whole Foods, I purchased some bagels that were amazingly good for a large market like Whole Foods. They told me they came from Blazing Bagels of Redmond. It took me a few times to find Blazing Bagels, but when you find it you will appreciate it even more like I did. If you think you're lost, keep going because it's hidden in a small industrial area. The smell, the look, the atmosphere and the wonderful service reminded me of the best of New York. I was a little overwhelmed by the selection, but now I appreciate it. I may

N.Y. DELI SANDWICHES

OUR N.Y. DELI SPECIALS
Want that N.Y. Deli style sandwich with more meat than nine out of ten doctors recommend? Then our N.Y. Deli sandwiches are the ones to order!

Your choice of bagel, rye, wheat, sourdough or baguette. Includes the "Best Pickle Soaker in the Northwest!"

Especially roasted for us in Redmond by excellent roasters who know much more about coffee than we do.

PICKLES
We serve only the best Kosher pickle in the NW!



MEATS AND MORE
Sold by the pound

Dennis goes out of his way to treat people well. As a customer and neighbor, I can tell you, he is loved in this community. People are just blown away with the products and the people he has hired to work here.

As good as the name!
We always offer Chocolate Chip, Oatmeal Raisin, Peanut Butter, Macadamia Nut and Ginger Molasses. We also make fantastic Black & White cookies!

Scones
We always have Blueberry and Apple Cinnamon and often offer surprise flavors, too. All of our scones are as natural as a hooey!

Muffins
100% Natural – 100% of the time
Blueberry, Chocolate Chip, Apple Cinnamon Crumb, Cranberry Orange, Lemon Poppy Seed, Honey Bran, Banana Nut and other seasonal flavors.
Also available in Sweet sizes.

Rugelach
Ever since Blazing Bagels opened our doors, we've been asked: "What about Rugelach?" Now we make Rugelach in several flavors and sell them by the pound!

never have the Sweet French Toast bagel, but the Jalapeno Pepperjack bagel is now a favorite. I love everything about this place and you can tell its customers love it too. I'm 40 plus and have never been in a retail place like this. It seems like everyone knows the owner and the employees seem to know every customer. They also bake brownies, muffins, scones and challah. They have the best Lox in the Seattle area and yesterday I had the Pastrami for the first time. It too is as good as their bagels. If you are a challah eater, they make the best I've ever eaten. Like my friend told me, Blazing Bagels is a real find and, I'll add, hard to find at that."

Another customer offered:

"I travel a lot and always look for the perfect bagel. From New York to California I have never had a bagel experience as good as I did at Blazing Bagels in Redmond The owner is named Dennis and he glows with passion for his product."

Carin S. from Bellevue, WA loves the hard-to-find offerings of Blazing Bagels.

"I won't pretend to know a New York bagel from a doughnut and I don't care. These are the best bagels I've ever had And they do deliveries to various companies that want to provide bagel service to their employees. That's how I discovered them."

Many of Blazing Bagels' most loyal customers are East Coast transplants like David L. from Redmond, WA:

"Since moving from 'New Yawk,' we've missed our H&H Bagels. Luckily for us there is a local bagel place near work that comes close. Blazing Bagels certainly aims to please—making fresh bagels every day in a wide and unique variety."

Steve Thorsen, a 39-years-old loyal customer, points out the personal service as a key to so many happy customers. "Dennis goes out of his way to treat people well. As a customer and neighbor, I can tell you, he is loved in this community. People are just blown away with the products and the people he has hired to work here."

Edible 3 Foot Challah

Rye Bread
A truly great Jewish Rye has always been hard to find in the Northwest – until now. From scratch, we make our own rye and we're really proud of it.

For catering pricing

Bagel Platter
For a Bagel Platter or Bagel Box. There are over 29 types of bagels and 11 flavors of cream cheese to choose from.

Seasonal Fruit Tray
A beautiful display of seasonable fruit available in small trays. We also make single serving fruit cups.

Turkey, Deli Roast Beef, Smoked Ham and Kosher Beef Salami.

tastes like it. Available on party trays or by the pound.



Cheese Anyone?



Salads



Bagel Ball Trays

Impact on Employees

Dennis' business is doing so well, he doubled the size of Blazing Bagels in Redmond and in April 2009 opened two new locations, retail space in the heart of nearby Bellevue's high-rises and a brand new location at Safeco Field—the home of the Mariners.

In addition to helping the local economy, Dennis has dedicated his business to hiring people most in need of his help. He said, “We’ve tried to help people with this business. We’ve hired local people, people that were being evicted, people recovering from cancer and people looking for a second chance.”

The impact of his business on the lives of those he chooses to hire has been immeasurable.

Whenever he runs a help-wanted ad, Dennis is flooded with applicants, yet somehow, the people that need Dennis most tend to float to the top. For Dennis and Blazing Bagels, it is all about relationships—relationships with the customers, the employees and the community. Dennis is about running a business that makes a profit, but he uses his profits to benefit the people he comes into contact with on a daily basis.

Forty-four year-old Jacklyn Roth has worked for Blazing Bagels for three years and has known Dennis for twice that time. She met Dennis while working at a deli that used his bagels. “I am a workaholic, but when I hurt my leg, the union wouldn’t let me work,” she recalled. “Dennis offered me a job, and I could see he was the same way as me. Anyone that works as hard as me has my respect.”

When Jackie’s house flooded, Dennis took a store van and used it to make sure she got as many of her possessions out as possible. He gave her an unused back room in the store to keep her items and then helped her find a new place.

When one of his older drivers didn’t show up for work one day, the family at Blazing Bagels didn’t hesitate to jump into action. They kept investigating and were eventually able to find out that the man, who lived alone, had a stroke and was in his apartment by himself. By 10 a.m., Dennis and his team had police at his apartment. He was quickly taken to the hospital and his family was notified so they could be there with him.

Caitlin Camplain, age 20, has worked for Blazing Bagel for about one year, starting in the Redmond store before moving on to the new Bellevue location. “This job is more than a job to me,” she said. “It is a lifeline, and the people that work here are family. Before I started working here, I was going through a really hard time in my life. I had run into one obstacle after another. I wasn’t happy with my family situation. I wasn’t happy with my living situation, with my relationships. I wasn’t happy with my job.”

At the time, she was living with her boyfriend’s parents and struggling to move out. She had a car that was continually broken down and was working at a job plagued by negativity and impersonality. As a result, she felt completely lost.

“Dennis opening up this Bellevue location opened up a lot of opportunities for me,” she said. “This job is helping me to rebuild my life and the people here are helping me to move forward and break through those obstacles. I’ve never been happier. I love getting up and coming to work here. I now have a place of my own, two cars and a dog.

Caitlin said, “Before I worked here, I was shy, quiet. Working here has brought out my personality, boosted my self-confidence and truly allowed my full personality to shine. This job . . . this business . . . is truly a blessing.”



Caitlin sees what he has done with Blazing Bagels as an inspiration and wants to someday own her own business. “It gives you hope that even if you don’t have anything, you can build something some day,” she said.



Like many who come in contact with Dennis, she sees what he has done with Blazing Bagels as an inspiration and wants to someday own her own business. “It gives you hope that even if you don’t have anything, you can build something some day,” she said.

Soon, the staff of Blazing Bagels will be joined by Amber, a 21-year-old woman with Downs Syndrome. She will be working two hours a day, as she begins to enter mainstream society and become self-sufficient and self-reliant.

In His Own Words: Joseph Aqui

After a difficult and abusive childhood, I became a violent repeat felon. I was sent to Washington state penitentiary in Walla Walla, and was locked up for 20 years. During that time, I met my wife through a prison correspondence program. I became a model prisoner and focused on fixing myself. Finally, I was conditionally released.

I knew in my heart that things had changed. I was placed in a transitional house in Seattle in February 2006. My only way out was to get a job. I applied to 300 different places in the Northwest, and I always received a “no”—sometimes it was a soft no, sometimes it was a hard no. I felt like a failure, like I was never going to be able to re-enter society and be a contributing member. Just then, I got a tap on the shoulder: It was someone telling me that Dennis was on the phone for me.

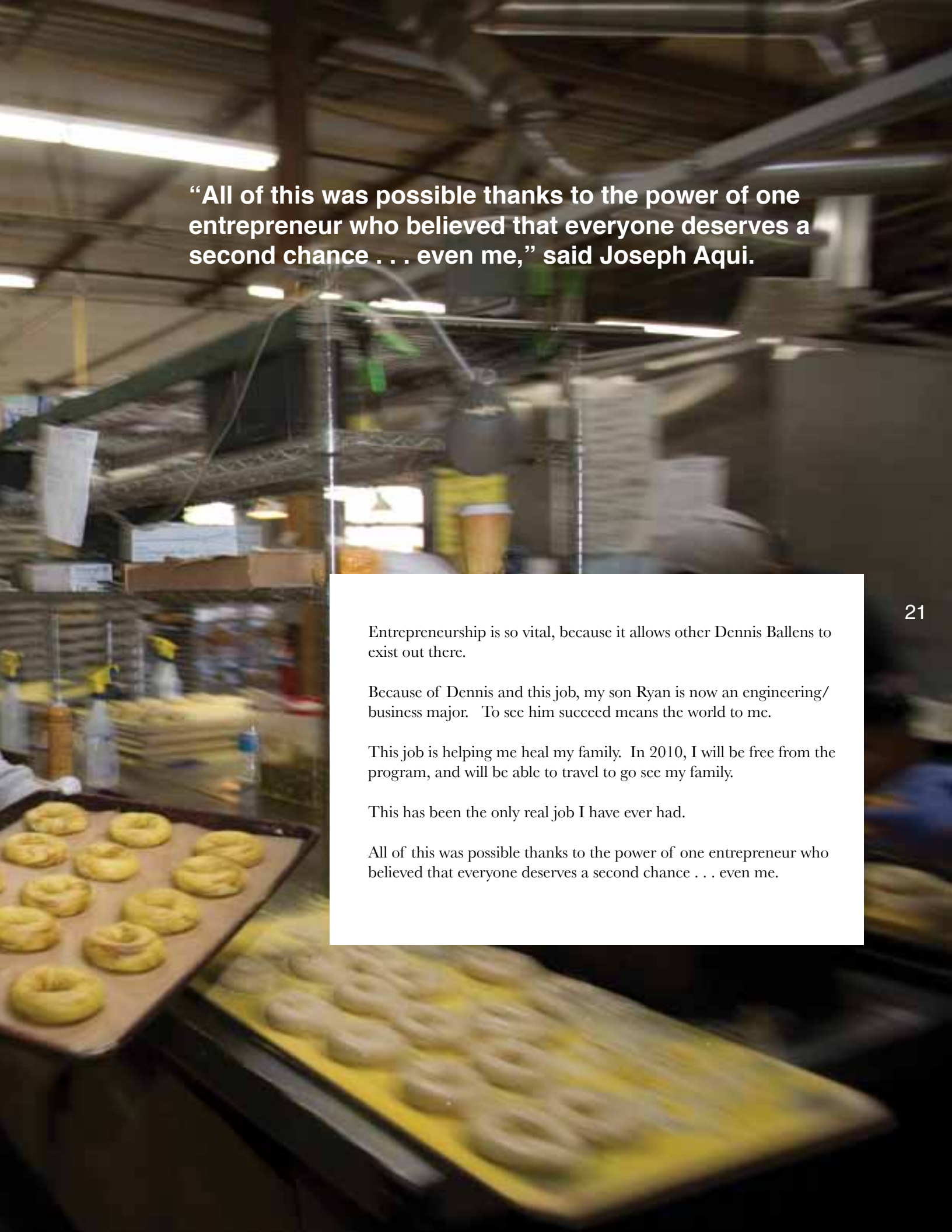
The very next day, I was hired by Blazing Bagels. It was on August 30, 2006. I have been working there for three-and-a-half years now, but the transition was not an easy process. The state required that I talk in front of all the employees and lay out my whole criminal history for them in detail. It was very difficult and very awkward, but they have a right to know. The people heard all of the horrible things I had done, but looked at the person I am now, not the person I was. They always measured me as a co-worker on my merit, and not on my past.

I don't know what made Dennis take a risk on me, but it was a true blessing. I've been able to send money to my children and save some for my own retirement. This job has meant everything to me. It has allowed me to progress to the point where I could leave the halfway house. It has meant I can be somewhere other than being locked up.

The people here are like a family. Dennis doesn't just invest in his business. He invests in his business in order to invest in people. His investment in me has paid off for both of us.

It has given me a boost in my self-esteem. It has also given me the chance to be a positive role model for others who are in my position. They can see that through faith, hard work and the generosity of others, you can begin to turn your life into something positive.





“All of this was possible thanks to the power of one entrepreneur who believed that everyone deserves a second chance . . . even me,” said Joseph Aqi.

Entrepreneurship is so vital, because it allows other Dennis Ballens to exist out there.

Because of Dennis and this job, my son Ryan is now an engineering/business major. To see him succeed means the world to me.

This job is helping me heal my family. In 2010, I will be free from the program, and will be able to travel to go see my family.

This has been the only real job I have ever had.

All of this was possible thanks to the power of one entrepreneur who believed that everyone deserves a second chance . . . even me.



“Knowing Dennis’ story has also been an inspiration to me. I would like to one day own my own business. . . . I know it will be hard work, but seeing how Dennis has persevered and achieved so much in such a short period of time, I know it is possible,” said Megan Misallati.

In Her Own Words: Megan Misallati

My husband was laid off in November 2008. He was a cabinet refinisher in Woodinville, WA. It was a great paying job, and they assured him that when they could, they would hire him back. They never did.


We have two kids, 8 and 10 years old, and were just barely getting by. We had just moved into a more expensive area and home. Soon it became more than we could afford. Then we received the bombshell news. We learned that the woman we had been paying had pocketed the money and not passed it on to the woman who actually owned the property. When her business failed in California, she returned and decided to live in the house.

We desperately needed somewhere to live. Dennis and Blazing Bagels came to the rescue. He gave me a job, allowed me to borrow the van to move my possessions, provided me with a solid reference and even combed through Craigslist to help me find housing options.

Blazing Bagels has also been really flexible with me and helpful with the kids. I’ve been able to adjust my schedule to pick up my children from school. There are not a lot of places that would show you that type of consideration. But this business feels like a community.

Knowing Dennis’ story has also been an inspiration to me. I would like to one day own my own business. I like to do printmaking, photography and culinary projects. I even came up with my own hot sauce.

I know it will be hard work, but seeing how Dennis has persevered and achieved so much in such a short period of time, I know it is possible.



“Dennis is very passionate about his business, and the more business he gets, the more passionate about it he becomes. That type of passion is contagious,” said Karen Priszner.

24

Karen Priszner is the 49-year-old general manager of Blazing Bagels. She has been with Dennis for three years. When asked for her job description, she responded: “It would be easier to say what I don’t do. I oversee payroll, accounts, staffing, act as store mom and generally do anything that Dennis doesn’t like doing.”

Dennis and others familiar with the business call her the savior of Blazing Bagels. Prior to joining his staff, Karen used to work for a salmon company that supplied Dennis. The bagel company always seemed to be having trouble with its books and billing. In 2005, Karen offered to come over and look at Dennis’ books. In January 2007, he finally took her up on her offer. She started working weekends and soon realized that she was desperately needed at the upstart company.

“I knew he needed help, but once I got in here, I saw how bad it was,” said Karen. “Like many entrepreneurs, his heart was not in the books.”



His passion was for selling and creating a great product. Had we not caught the problems when we did, we wouldn't be here today.

"I left my old job, because there wasn't much opportunity for growth, but more importantly, because I knew I could do more good here."

Karen shows a devotion to Blazing Bagels that few non-owners show to a business. "My family jokes that this is my first home," she laughed. "I spend between 65 and 75 hours a week here. I believe in this business. My husband will even come in and help. I am emotionally attached. My daughter has worked here, and my son has been involved also. Dennis is very passionate about his business, and the more business he gets, the more passionate about it he becomes. That type of passion is contagious."

There is another reason Karen gives whole-heartedly to Dennis Ballen and Blazing Bagels. "I feel good about what Dennis is doing," she said. "He uses this business to have a huge impact on the community. Both my daughter and I have gone through cancer. Dennis is a big believer in giving back, and he has been especially generous to those charities aimed at fighting cancer and supporting those living with the disease. He has given of his time, product and energy. People in this community know that they can count on Blazing Bagels to come through for them in their time of need."

Impact on Charities

Blazing Bagels has quickly built a reputation as a business that cares deeply about the community. As a business, and as an individual, Dennis generously supports charities ranging from schools to cancer and cystic fibrosis research institutions, and Jerry's Kids to Seattle Children's Hospital.

"We don't turn a lot of people down, but because we send so much out, we try to focus," said Dennis. "It's so hard to turn people down, but with limited resources, we have to have some prioritization about who we help. We have decided to put our focus on local schools, children's hospitals or groups that support cancer victims or are working to achieve a cure. Those groups don't ever have to ask twice."

With the support of their customers, Blazing Bagels has been able to make a great difference in the lives of others.

Andy Willmer, fundraising director of the American Diabetes Association of Washington and Northern Idaho, said, "Dennis Ballen and Blazing Bagels have been an indispensable partner of the ADA for the past three years. Most recently, they provided a generous donation of bagels for the cyclists at our Tour de Cure."

The 2009 Tour de Cure was a very successful event thanks to the energy and commitment of volunteers, riders and sponsors like Blazing Bagels. Together, there were nearly 620 riders registered for the event and more than 100 volunteers and numerous guests, all helping to raise more than \$250,000 to date.

"Blazing Bagels' commitment to helping our fundraising efforts is also helping to further the ADA's mission to prevent and cure diabetes and to improve the lives of all people affected by diabetes," said Willmer. "Nearly 24 million people in the U.S. have diabetes and over 57 million Americans have pre-diabetes or elevated blood glucose levels, and have an increased chance of developing diabetes. It is only through the generosity of organizations like Blazing Bagels that we are able to continue our efforts to conquer diabetes in our lifetime. Dennis' help of our work is magnified even more in this region. The Northwest is a hotbed of research, and we've been able to dedicate nearly \$4 million to that research effort over the years. Having local businesses support our efforts is crucial to keeping those research dollars flowing."

Lynne Singer, Northwest coordinator for Healing Journeys, is another Blazing Bagels fan. The company provided bagels for Healing Journeys' "Cancer as a Turning Point" conference, which was attended by more than 200 people of which 60 percent were cancer survivors, 25 percent were support people/caregivers and 15 percent were health professionals. "It was an inspiring and fulfilling day for all who attended, and Blazing Bagel and others like them were crucial to making it a successful event," said Singer.

The 2009 Tour de Cure was a very successful event thanks to the energy and commitment of volunteers, riders and sponsors like Blazing Bagels.

Then there is Dennis' support of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. Cystic fibrosis is an inherited chronic disease that affects the lungs and digestive system of about 30,000 children and adults in the United States (70,000 worldwide). To assist the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (CFF), Dennis and Blazing Bagels started with one fundraising event, and it has now blossomed into a great partnership. He has provided food for events, helped sponsor golf tournaments and been a leading advocate for the organization.

"It is wonderful to see a company jump on board to support a cause, expecting nothing back in return," said Dottie Moore of the CFF.

Allison Thrasher, who is the organization's senior director of special events, called Blazing Bagels' support "instrumental to the success of our Seattle Great Strides event. When Blazing Bagels and other small businesses commit to supporting the work of the foundation, their investment continues to bring hope to the 30,000 children and young adults living with CF today."

Another organization Blazing Bagels has helped is the Liberty Road Foundation, a Christian faith-based 501(c)(3) organization that brings businesses together, mobilizing their financial contributions and energy to help the disadvantaged worldwide with services that range from medical relief and shelter to education and clothing.

Karilyn Dammarell, event chair for the Liberty Road Foundation, called Blazing Bagels one of the organization's best partners. The proceeds from annual events supported by Blazing Bagels have enabled Liberty Road to partner with five Seattle-area agencies and a Latin American-based charity to deliver vital services to people in need, thereby fostering social, economic and spiritual development. This includes before- and after-school programs, reaching youth living on the streets of Seattle, building roads in Guatemala and helping substance abusers regain control of their lives.

Dennis' support of local high school sports teams and other activities for youth has caught the attention of other small business owners in the Redmond area.

One such entrepreneur is Sandy Flores, who co-owns Redmond-based Emerald City Gymnastics Academy with her sister, Susan Townsend. She recently wrote Dennis in response to his contribution to a local high school gymnastics meet: "Dennis your breakfast sandwiches were amazing, the bagel dogs were incredible and all the bagels and cream cheese you donated was above and beyond. Dennis, you are truly the perfect example of the community business owner. Your kindness and support shown to this community is admired. I am proud to be a fellow Redmond business owner. I hope you know how much you are appreciated for all you do."

Like Dennis, Sandy Flores is committed to using her successes to help others. Inspired by the example set by Blazing Bagels, she has become another illustration of the power

“Dennis Ballen has served this community and this [Old Fire House] teen center in every way possible. He has helped construct structures for the facility, served on panels discussing his expertise in entrepreneurship, donated food and money.”

of one entrepreneur. When Sandy learned that the son of friends had been diagnosed with Chiari Malformation, she followed Dennis’ example and jumped in to help. (Chiari Malformation is a serious neurological disorder where the bottom part of the brain, the cerebellum, descends out of the skull and crowds the spinal cord, putting pressure on both the brain and spine and causing many symptoms. If left untreated, it can result in severe paralysis.)

Dakota Atkins was three years old when it was discovered that he needed surgery—the only way to successfully treat Chiari Malformation. His parents, however, did not have full medical coverage and needed the help of someone with a creative, entrepreneurial mind like Sandy.

Sandy created a red bracelet in Dakota’s honor, with “DAKOTA’S ANGELS” on one side and “CONQUER CHIARI” on the other. She sold the bands for a minimum of a \$5 donation, and raised more than \$10,000 for his surgery.

The Old Firehouse Teen Center is another Redmond institution that benefits from this power of one entrepreneur.

It’s every kid’s dream club house: a place for youth aged 13-19 to hang out, skate, take art classes, develop pictures, play pool, see live bands and go on field trips—and it just happens to be located in an old firehouse building. Redmond’s Old Fire House Teen Center serves Redmond’s youth with arts, music, recreation, education and personal support services. In an average week, the Old Fire House has 300 teen visits. Young people are very involved in program planning and implementation, giving them a sense of ownership over the center.

Many of Redmond’s young people felt alienated and many were totally withdrawn from mainstream activities and social cliques. The Teen Center addresses those needs. There is a full recording studio, a pool hall, onsite counseling and a photography dark room. They take kids with any skill levels in any activity, as long as it is a healthy way of expression. The teen center is a safe place to keep kids away from other unsafe activities.



One of the Old Fire House's biggest fans is Dennis Ballen. "The Redmond Fire House was once a run-down, drug area, but it has really changed. They now have a punk prom for students who don't fit in at the regular school prom. Some of these kids look pretty weird, but they are really good kids."

Ballen continued, "They do a lot of good for young people. I have seen it in my own family. They turned my daughter's life around, gave her a sense of community and artistic outreach. Now she is heavily involved with the center and has produced a CD and become active in the local music scene."

Rana Shmait, a 27-year-old center worker and former participant, believes that without the support of businesses like Blazing Bagels, the teen center would not be as enjoyable a place for young people and would be missed in this community. "It helps them break through their social barriers and build new relationships and understandings across cultures and economic groups," she said.

"We receive a lot of donations from various companies, including Microsoft and Whole Foods, but we were literally shocked by how much Blazing Bagels donated," said Shmait. "Dennis Ballen has served this community and this teen center in every way possible. He has helped construct structures for the facility, served on panels discussing his expertise in entrepreneurship, donated food and money."

In Her Own Words: Nina Ramsey, Cancer Walk Participant

When I came in here for the first time, I was blown away by how friendly Dennis was. I could tell right away that he is someone that I was going to like. I'm excited for the success he has had so far. It is really inspiring.

I came in because I was participating in the three-day, 60-mile walk to fight breast cancer. My friend, Jennifer Disch, and I decided to do the walk and needed to raise \$4,600. We came in just to ask if we could place a canister for donations near his register. He immediately told me, "Sure, but why not set up a booth with balloons, posters and the works?"

A lot of businesses accepted the can, but Dennis took up our cause—it was a given. We're going to do this. I left there so excited and motivated. The journey of fundraising turned out to be as positive as doing the walk itself.

I showed up at the shop at 5 a.m. on a Saturday, and was just amazed at how much had been done. A tent was set up and everyone inside was high energy. Dennis came up to me and said, "Today you are one of my employees. You can have free food, drinks, whatever you need." Dennis would come check on us. He was constantly thinking of us. Jay Buhner of the Mariners, a local celebrity, came by the booth thanks to Dennis. And customers gave.

I've had a lot of cancer in my family. My father is a nine-year survivor and I felt this was a great way to give back. It took a couple of months to raise the money. The Seattle walk raised more than \$5.5 million. We wore our Blazing Bagels pink t-shirts in the camps. It felt good to be associated with such a caring and honorable business.

Dennis made me feel more connected to this community. I felt like there was finally a business community I could reach out to for support.

In building his business, he has helped others, and in helping others he has built his business. My brother lives on the East Coast. Whenever I go to visit him, his only request is to get some Blazing Bagels.

Dennis has also inspired me to think like an entrepreneur. I am always thinking of ways to do new things and his story inspires me. I have never seen him be anything but energetic.

Dennis is one of those people that you always wish the best for. You just hope he has a great life because he has given so much back. I'm so glad that someone of his integrity and feeling has been the guy to make it.



“Dennis has also inspired me to think like an entrepreneur. I am always thinking of ways to do new things and his story inspires me. I have never seen him be anything but energetic,” said Nina Ramsey.



Inspiring the Next Generation

Through the power of one entrepreneur, Dennis Ballen turned bagels into a means of transforming not only his own life after getting laid off, but also improving the lives of countless people around him through the products and services he provides his customers, through employment, through his advocacy for free speech and through his widespread philanthropy.

All this would be enough for many entrepreneurs, but Dennis has made it his personal mission to also mentor and inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs.

Blazing Bagels is heavily involved in the DECA career preparation program in a dozen school districts. More than 60 years ago, DECA, an association of marketing students, organized around an ambitious goal: to improve education and career opportunities for students interested in careers in marketing, management and entrepreneurship. What began with a few hundred students in 17 states has grown to more than 185,000 students in all 50 states, Canada, Guam, Puerto Rico, Germany and Mexico. DECA is in 110 high schools with more than 10,000 students in Washington.

Ron Cooper is responsible for Advisor Development for DECA in the state of Washington. He has been involved with DECA since high school and spent more than 35 years in the classroom as a teacher. Cooper said Dennis has been an inspiration to the DECA students in western Washington: “He is a dynamic speaker. He comes into a classroom and discusses his experiences—the good and the bad—and the students’ eyes light up. He can tell them about the challenges and rewards of entrepreneurship in a way they just can’t learn from a text book alone. He supplements the text book. They read about choosing a good location, but then he comes and tells them about opening his Bellevue store and the things he considered in making that decision.”

Dennis has personified for the students the work ethic, creativity and dedication that it takes to successfully start and run a business. The students want to hear about real entrepreneurship and he gives them real insights. He talks about financing, how to negotiate with vendors and how to manage staff. “It’s an ‘ah ha’ moment for the students,” said Cooper. “They see Dennis, Blazing Bagels and know that this is the real deal.”

Beyond speaking to classes, Dennis has been an integral part of every aspect of the program:

- He is a mentor/advisor to the students.
- He is a supplier of bagels to the DECA student stores.
- As an employer, he has hired many DECA students, giving them one of their first jobs.

At every turn, Dennis demonstrates to the students the power of one entrepreneur.

“There is nothing Dennis wouldn’t do for the students and the community,” said Cooper. “He has given money, time, and product and has gone above and beyond in his commitment to the kids. Whenever I need help, I know I can count on Dennis.”

The young people Dennis comes in contact with through his bagel business all come away with a new appreciation for him as a person and as an entrepreneur. They walk away from their experiences with a true understanding of the possible.

Paige Collins, an 18-year-old freshman at Western Washington University, is one such person. Blazing Bagels was her first real job, at age 16. She started helping out in the retail shop, but worked her way over to the wholesale side of the business. Before long, she was proving herself and taking on more responsibilities, including overseeing the businesses’ efforts at farmers’ markets.

“It was the perfect first job,” she says. “It allowed a lot of growth. I could see myself coming out of my shell and growing with the experience. Students like me worked the weekends and learned from some of the other employees.”

BLAZING BAGELS



Paige had always been a good student but never had real experience taking leadership or being in charge.

“My friends had other jobs for bigger companies, with more employees,” said Paige. “Their hours were shorter and their work loads were more reasonable, but they had much less responsibility. There were times when it was stressful, and I would wish for some simple job in a big company, but then I would realize the price would be too high.”

While she worked at Blazing Bagels, Paige was a student at Skyline High School where she graduated with a 3.95 grade point average. “Balancing the workload and the job was insane,” she recalled. “But the experience was great because now I know that I can balance all of these things and still succeed.”

Now a journalism major at Western Washington University, Paige joins other young workers at Blazing Bagels who often return to the shop after being away at school. “Going back to visit recently was like going back home,” she said. “Dennis has become like a father figure to me.”

Hayley Young, an 18-year-old senior at Lake Washington High School, said, “Working at Blazing Bagels has really taught me good time management. I have a 3.9 GPA, play volleyball and am involved in four different clubs. But school always comes first and Dennis has always been very supportive of that.”

Hayley, who plans to major in business at the University of Washington, was also inspired by Dennis. “Because of my experience working at Blazing Bagels, I was able to get a job at the DECA store at my school,” she said. “I never thought of business as something I wanted

to pursue, but seeing his story inspired me to want to join the entrepreneurial class and consider business as a major in college.”

She said, “I’d like to own my own shop dealing in merchandise and apparel. Knowing that he started so small and has grown his business to this is remarkable, and it gives people hope that they can do the same.”

Another lesson students of Dennis Ballen take away is a what a hard worker he is.

“I’ve never seen him stop,” observed Hayley. “He got fired one day, but that was never going to stop him. He started a business the next day. It has taught me to be the same way . . . to never give up or give in.”

She is quick to add that Dennis has also taught her to not only work hard, but to put the rewards of that hard work into giving back.

“Dennis has a big heart and is always willing to help,” said Paige. “There were many times that I saw people struggling and he just jumped in to help. I worked there every weekend and there were always orders for donations to charities. Of course, like all entrepreneurs, he is in it for the money, but he is also in it to help people. One feeds off the other.”

The Sacrifice of an Entrepreneur

As most entrepreneurs can attest to, it was not an easy journey, but one filled with doubt, insecurities, obstacles to overcome and great personal sacrifice. For the past 10 years, Dennis has worked 14 to 18 hours a day, seven days a week. Even when he has “free time,” he finds himself obsessed with things related to his business. While taking his first vacation in nine years, all he could think about was the next move that would better his business.

The business also took a financial toll on his family in the early days. Dennis had to refinance his house five times to make ends meet, and for the first few years, Blazing Bagels wasn’t much of a source of income. Dennis could not pay his bills for almost two years.

But he took the long view.

“It’s not about the right now,” he says. “It’s about what happens five years down the road. We have grown 27 percent over the last year, but as the owner, I don’t get to take money out of the business. Almost everything gets reinvested into the business. We need new ovens. Those run \$35,000 a piece. We have gone from 18 employees to 50. We’ve opened new shops in downtown Bellevue and Seattle. For every retail shop we open, we can hire 10 to 15 new employees. I am always looking at where this business is going . . . not where it is. I want to create something that I know will be here for my children, grandchildren, and all of those future employees and customers.”

Jenna Ballen, Dennis’ 22-year-old daughter and a junior at Shoreline Community College, says that the toll on the family was especially hard.

“I saw how hard it was going to be on everyone, especially my mom,” said Jenna. “For the early years, my mom was the main provider. Dad is the creative, risk-taker. Mom is more the conservative one with money and the bill payer. Two to three years into the business when he first got a location, he was gone all the time.”

This was a significant change from his previous life. At BASE, Dennis worked primarily from home. The family was used to seeing him all the time, even accompanying him on sales calls. When Blazing Bagels started to take root, things changed. He left at 3 a.m. and he wouldn’t be home until 8 or 9 p.m.

“I want to start my own business some day. Just knowing that my dad did it makes me want to do it also. I know it is possible,” said Jenna Ballen.



Dennis lived with the fear of disappointment and terror that things could go wrong. Such sacrifice and stress is a common theme among entrepreneurs. The time and energy necessary to develop a business from scratch is unrelenting.

Today, Jenna finds inspiration in the sacrifices made by her family for Blazing Bagels. “It’s exciting to see what he has created,” she said. “I want to start my own business some day. Just knowing that my dad did it makes me want to do it also. I know it is possible. I can’t imagine working for someone in the future.”

She said, “When he worked at BASE, we took more family vacations, but those small sacrifices were worth it, especially when I think about the impact his business has been able to have in this community. He contributes to high school fundraisers, charity races, schools and almost anything local or cancer-related.”

Jenna knows that the sacrifices were not just important to others, but were essential to the man Dennis Ballen is. She said, “Like most entrepreneurs, I think my dad needs a level of independence and creativity. He has a constant, driving fear of ever being reliant on someone else for a job. I don’t see him ever retiring. He will always invent stuff. Growing up he had so many ideas. He made

emergency survival kits; he had a decorating/home repair business. Then there was ‘Knock on This’—his idea to sell a wooden block that people could knock on for good luck. It was his take on the pet rock. He would never stop working. He has too many ideas in his head.”

The pain of the sacrifice is still clear however. Jenna teared up as she talked about missing her dad. “Part of the reason we love him so much is his creativity,” she said. “When he started Blazing Bagels, we didn’t know how serious it was going to be. There was a long time when we worried it would turn out to be just another ‘Knock on This.’ Looking back on it, Dad needed this business—this outlet for his creativity—and this community needed all the good that would come from this one business.”

Conclusion

Every year, a large number of new businesses are formed in the United States. For the most part, these enterprises are small businesses formed by a single entrepreneur like Dennis Ballen.⁸ These entrepreneurs affect their communities economically by creating new jobs, markets and innovations.

As Dennis’ entrepreneurial endeavors demonstrate, the power of one entrepreneur goes beyond the creation of individual profit. In pursuing his own prosperity, Dennis has expanded the local economy of Redmond and Bellevue, opened up opportunities for those who typically have difficulty entering the mainstream workforce and provided inspiration and professional guidance for aspiring entrepreneurs of all ages. At the same time, he has used the resources attained through his business to aid some of the most vulnerable members of society, including those stricken with disease, poverty and a lack of hope or aspirations.

As Dennis Ballen proves every day, the power of one entrepreneur exists in the unbridled ability of individuals acting in their own interest to positively impact others.



And Dennis is only one such entrepreneur. His bagel business began out of a crisis—a sudden, unexpected lay off. With a single homemade cart, a 20-year-old idea and a drive to provide for his family, he created something that would outlive himself. To accomplish his goals, he had to overcome challenges, make difficult sacrifices and break through the barriers put in his way by bureaucracies and regulations at all levels of government.

The question remains: How many more Dennis Ballens are out there?

The answer: Countless.

In a nation supportive of these individuals pursuing their dreams, removing artificial and unnecessary barriers and encouraging their ambitions and abilities, the power of one entrepreneur can transform countless numbers of lives and literally change the world.

End Notes

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About the Author



Booker T. Stallworth, Jr. is a public relations specialist, columnist, political commentator and passionate advocate for free individuals, free societies and free markets. Booker is a regular contributor to the *Washington Examiner*, *Human Events Online* and *FoxNews.com* and a lecturer with the Federalist Society for Law & Public Policy Studies.

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