

BUSINESS 101

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND PHOTOS BY PATRICK PATTON

The sign in the parking lot of the brick building at 302 Farabee Dr. in Lafayette reads “Brooks Food Equipment, Inc. – Gourmet Kitchen Supplies.” At first glance, the store looks only industrial — which it is — but the sign adds: “Public Welcome.”

Once you walk into the store, you won’t want to leave — whether you are a gourmet cook, or if your kitchen is large or small. Brooks Food Equipment has hundreds of items for sale to individual customers in the front of the store: paring knives, coffee mugs, cheese slicers, pizza paddles, ladles, tongs, tea kettles and a large selection of stainless steel pots and pans to name only a few.

Browsing is made easy because the aisles are wide. The back of the store has a large warehouse of industrial items: dishwashers, meat processing supplies, scales, disposers and other equipment used in commercial kitchens.

“We have so many lovely customers,” says Mildred Brooks, 85, who developed the business with her late husband, Robert Brooks. Their son, Gary Brooks, who was raised working in the business, has now taken over its operations, but Mildred comes to work Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., to do whatever needs to be done, because she knows the facility, she knows the merchandise and she knows the customers.



Mildred Brooks is extremely proud of the business she and her husband started more than 35 years ago.

Brooks Food Equipment, Inc.

“I consider them lifelong customers and friends,” she says. “We have made so many nice friends, and we attend their weddings, their funerals and other occasions.”

Mildred and Robert Brooks came to Lafayette in 1952 so Mildred could continue to help her husband, who at that time was a distributor for Hobart, a leading supplier of food equipment and service for the foodservice and food retail industries. She worked with Robert in the office in Indianapolis. Mildred wanted to help her husband and work from home, so they landed a smaller sales territory in Lafayette. Mildred did the books while Robert made sales calls.

They used the garage of their first home on 29th Street for equipment storage and service; their home became their office. The family moved to two other locations in the city—Underwood Street and 14th Street—before they built and moved into the current building on Farabee Drive about 35 years ago.

The business became Brooks Food Equipment in 1993 when Hobart changed management and Mildred and Robert decided to go independent. In addition to Hobart equipment, the store now carries items made by a variety of manufacturers.

Gary Brooks, 58, manager of the business, says that his primary goal is to make his customers happy. He does that by selling items of quality—for industrial use and to individuals.

“You can go to a big-box retailer and buy knives,” he notes. “You can come in here and buy a very good knife for about the same price. People say, ‘Oh wow, I didn’t know this existed.’” Gary also travels to other states to represent Brooks Food Equipment and to participate in trade shows.

“I do all of the deer and turkey classics in the Midwest,” he says.

Although the company has only five employees—including Gary and Mildred—it has an expansive customer base, serving large Indiana companies in addition to area

grocery stores, factories with kitchens, schools and churches. Brooks has two service technicians: one has been with the business for 32 years, and the other for 34 years.

“Our service technicians are constantly on the road doing work for such customers as churches, sororities, fraternities and restaurants,” Gary Brooks says. In addition, the company does a lot of service work for government institutions.

Giving the customers one-on-one attention—the interaction that sometimes seems missing in today’s age of the megastore—is the way he insists on operating the business. For that reason, Brooks Food Equipment does not use e-mail, opting for the phone call that requires a more personal exchange.

“The equipment lasts, and once they buy it, they come back,” he says. ☼

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Hours: Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. –5 p.m.



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