

I Knew What Kind of Boss I Wanted to Be'

For Dean Jacobs, a sense of community made it easy to work hard



Jacobs with employees and her famous seven-layer cake

I STARTED WORKING in a dime store at age 15. I've been working nearly all my life. By my 40s, I had a job at a grocery store, and one of my coworkers had the idea of baking coffee cakes and selling them at the store. So, we started doing that. Our seven-layer chocolate cake came probably two or three months after that. Once we had a new recipe and got people to try it, we'd try something else.

If I hadn't had the manager I had at the grocery store, it never would have worked, though. There was a lot of trial and error with the recipes. We threw away so many ingredients, but he never said a word. And you know what? We kept doing it till we got it like it was supposed to be. He made working there enjoyable, because we

knew he wasn't going to say anything if we messed up.

I always said I would not quit the store or take the baking out on my own as long as my boss was there. But when the store changed hands and he left, it was my impulse to try. That was in 1994; I was 60 years old. I had been earning stock in the store, and I sold that to start my own bakery. And we're still here.

We're known for our seven-layer cakes, but we also make cookies, fudge, brownies and two-layer cakes. Every cake is baked by hand. I would not be satisfied using machines to speed things up. If we did, the cakes would be the same as other ones you see in grocery stores. That's not what we're after. The way we do it, you know it's personal. We sell to three

distributors and from our own hometown store and other local businesses. (We are not able to ship.)

Going from being a worker to being the owner was a challenge. I was used to somebody telling me what to do, not me telling other people what to do. But I figured it out, little by little. And it helped that I knew what kind of boss I wanted to be.

We've got 15 employees now. Many are in their 60s, 70s, even their 80s. Some have been here just about the whole time. I ran the place until a few years ago; now my two daughters and son are doing that. We try to make everybody feel at home. You can't go wrong by treating people right.

—As told to Samantha Paige Rosen

Dean Jacobs, 88, is the founder and owner of Dean's Cake House in Andalusia, Alabama.