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SUCCESS

STORY!



Joe Steffy, Poppin Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn

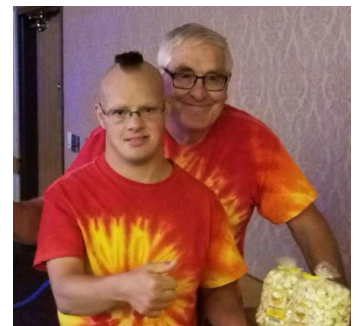


Joe Steffy
Sole Proprietor
poppinjoes.org

In a promotional photo, Joe Steffy, sole proprietor of Poppin Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn stands with his arms folded resolutely across his chest, sporting his trademark mohawk, and wearing the fiery orange T-shirt of his brand. On the wall behind Joe a quote by David Brinkley reads: "A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him."

In 2000, Ray Steffy, Joe's father, was searching for meaningful and productive work for his son Joe, then a recent high school graduate with Down Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder. At a farmers market Ray observed a kettle corn operation. He noted aspects of the process he knew Joe could do. Ray reflected on fond memories of watching TV with his family while sharing a bowl of freshly popped corn, picked from their garden in Iowa. This could be a perfect fit!

Inspired, Ray and Janet, Joe's mother, acquired a kettle corn popper, fashioned their own tumbler and screen, set up shop in their garage, and began making kettle corn the "old German way", with sugar.



Joe and his father started popping corn on weekends at grocery stores, outdoor festivals and events around Louisburg, Kansas. They also sold product through select retailers. Over time Joe learned all aspects of the production such as setting up and breaking down the equipment, tumbling, screening, and packaging.

Joe Steffy, Poppin Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn Continued

Poppin Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn was officially launched in 2005. At start up Joe received \$10,000 in grand funds from the Kansas Developmental Disabilities Council to purchase equipment from North Bend. Vocational Rehabilitation, through the Kansas PASS plan, invested \$5500 in Joe's business to be applied to startup costs for a printer and other office equipment. Within ten years the business was grossing \$75,000 annually.



In 2020 Joe relocated to Woodbine, Georgia to live with his sister, Jen and her family. Although Joe had built up a profitable kettle corn business in Kansas, and was able to transport some equipment, Joe and Jen needed to essentially rebuild the business from the ground up. They used grant monies saved in Joe's Stable or ABLE account, \$10,000 from the National Down syndrome Society, and \$20,000 from the Griffin-Hammis Associates' K Fund to purchase land and modify a building for production. Money from Joe's ABLE account was used to purchase a caramelizer, and his family invested in 'Pop and Go', a mobile food truck. Additionally, Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency approved \$10,000 for the purchase of equipment.

Navigating the regulations and assistance funding, which varies state by state, during the height of COVID is an arduous task. But Joe had come to Georgia with experience and confidence in his brand. Soon Joe's new community of Camden County knew him as Poppin' Joe and rallied behind him to rebuild and grow his business in two short years.



Today Poppin Joe's Gourmet Kettle Korn has fourteen employees. Their original menu of five flavors has expanded to twenty flavors. Marketing focuses on retail outlets, special orders and online sales through his web site www.poppinjoes.org, and etsy store. Joe also offers fundraising opportunities for local organizations, school groups, and non-profits.

Ray Steffy dreamed of a purposeful life for his son Joe at a time when business opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities was untenable. Through Joe's dedication and pioneer spirit, his family, the community, and supportive organizations, that dream became reality. Joe sums it up best: "I am a member in the community that I work in, which gives me a place to belong."