

Fredericksburg woman whips up tasty business book

BY CATHY JETT / THE FREE LANCE-STAR Nov 2, 2014  0

Marilynn Mendell looked up from her office window into her commercial kitchen and saw a startling sight. A new cook for her western New York catering business was holding a brand new aluminum pan and slashing it repeatedly with a knife.

Mendell, who now lives in Fredericksburg and runs a marketing and public relations business, promptly asked the cook why she was putting holes in the pan.

“Well,” she’s quoted as saying in Mendell’s new book, “I saw the holes in the older pans and figured it was the secret to your Killer Brownies.”

It wasn’t, but sometimes a knife would go through the pan when the thick brownie dough was cut. But the episode taught Mendell one of the many valuable business lessons that she illustrates with stories — and recipes — in “Elbow Grease + Chicken Fat.”

“I quickly understood what had happened,” she says in her book. “She had surmised the reason behind the holes in the pans, or she may have seen another cook put holes in the pans. Either way, I hadn’t taught her to make the brownies.”

Mendell, president of WinSpin CIC Inc. and an adjunct professor at George Mason and Georgetown universities, uses the Killer Brownies episode to illustrate the need for businesses to develop a clear set of instructions for their employees, which can save money in the long run.

“I tell them that if they develop a set of How Tos, if they fire someone or someone leaves, the new employee will have a set of instructions.”

Mendell started her catering company from scratch in the 1980s after a divorce left her with three sons to raise, \$200 a month in child support and just \$1,000 in the bank, she said. She quickly realized that cooking was only a small part of running the business. The majority of her time was spent dealing with the problems that cropped up, including melting wedding cake frosting and

nonfunctioning stoves in clients’ kitchens. The disasters taught her a lot — and made for good stories.

But it took a comment about the one on carrot cake — in which an employee accidentally used salt instead of sugar for her youngest son’s class — to make Mendell realize she had all the ingredients needed to whip up a business book.

“One of the biggest lessons I learned was that stories sell anything,” she writes in the introduction to her book. “It’s because they’re the glue that make concepts stick.”

“Elbow Grease + Chicken Fat,” which was published last summer, features dozens of stories covering business lessons on topics such as time management, willingness to change and keeping your sense of humor. They’re based on her catering experience, and each comes with a recipe — including the one for Killer Brownies.

Mendell pitched the book to agents and publishers, but they all turned her down.

“The problem they had was it’s not a business book and it’s not a cookbook, so where do they put it?” she said during a recent interview. “They asked me to divide it in half and just do the business book or the cookbook. The point is I’m always doing stories about cooking, so it made sense to include the recipes.”

Undeterred, Mendell hired editors and designers and had the book published herself. It’s available on Amazon.com and winspincic.com, as well as at The Kitchen at Whittingham in downtown Fredericksburg, Politics and Prose in Washington and a Buffalo, N.Y., bookstore. It sells for \$35.95.

“I’m on the speaking circuit. You have to have videos today; you have to have a book. The [audience] doesn’t care if it’s self-published,” said Mendell, who plans to use it to market herself. “It’s also in the university system. U.Va. could use it as a text. Those are all the side benefits.”