

## TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS IN LOUDON:

**Michele's Sweet Shoppe, LLC**

By Lee Laughlin

*Taking Care of Business In Loudon is a monthly feature spotlighting a Loudon business researched and written on a volunteer basis by Lee Laughlin. At this time, we have profiles lined up through the end of 2008. However, if you would like to add your business to be profiled, please contact her at [laughlin@fearlessevents.com](mailto:laughlin@fearlessevents.com) or 783-8971.*

**B**elieve it or not, it all started with whoopee pies.

Michele Hollbrook has always had the entrepreneurial spirit. She owned her own sign making business, First Class Signs & Designs, in Nashua for four years. In 2006 she was feeling the urge to start another business. Friends and associates had always raved, nay, fought over her whoopee pies, so as is Michele's way, she set about researching what it takes to start a food business.

I have heard Michele affectionately and respectfully referred to as a Type A+ personality. I have to agree. Michele is precise, methodical, thorough, and above all passionate. She knows her strengths and weaknesses and if she can't do it right, she won't do it. All of these qualities meld together in her roles as a business owner, mother, wife, and Girl Scout Leader. Her face slowly flushes pink when we sit down to discuss her blossoming gourmet popcorn business Michele's Sweet Shop. As we talk, the pace of her voice quickens and she leans in to share her excitement for her hand crafted gourmet confection.

But back the beginning, her original intention was to start making whoopee pies, so, she began scouring the internet for information. She learned about licensing and packaging requirements and she researched the competition. Throughout this process, she was making white chocolate popcorn for teacher gifts and volunteer appreciation. After complimenting her on the fantastic confection, many recipients told her she should sell her creation. Whoopee pies are a very labor-intensive product, so Michele put them aside in favor of gourmet popcorn. She spent the fall of 2006 and early 2007 in the research and development phase of her business. She toiled away creating new flavors and perfecting her recipes. Michele recruited friends, family, and colleagues to help her with her research. People were more than willing to take new flavors to work and ask for feedback. Feedback came from the Nashua Police department, Barlo Signs in Hudson, and even an esteemed New York law firm.

Suppliers of all-natural ingredients were located and packaging tested. Michele was adamant that her popcorn would have no chemicals or preservatives, so it was necessary to locate

packaging that was airtight and affordable, yet attractive. "You it with your eyes and that first impression is so important."

She worked closely with our own Deb Kardaseski to formulate a logo and supporting branding materials. No detail was left to chance. In early spring, of 2007, she installed a commercial cooking kitchen in the basement of her home. She sought and received licensing from the state of New Hampshire and by the fall of 2007, Michele's Sweet Shoppe, LLC was open for business.

Just about one year later, business is good. Sales have increased every month but one since the company opened, and 2008 sales have well surpassed 2007 sales. This is especially notable since Michele's dedication to delivering a quality product lead her to the decision NOT to ship any chocolate popcorn from May 1 through September 30. Temperatures in shipping trucks would cause the chocolate to melt and make the popcorn soggy.

Much of her business to date has been via word of mouth or through her presence at craft and food shows. In June, Michele's was awarded Tastiest Creation for their Chocolate Peanut Butter Popcorn at the CareGivers Chocolate Lovers Fantasy. Michele's even got a mention in *New Hampshire Magazine* the same month.

In the last few months, she's been researching and contacting retail outlets that might be a good match for her product. "This is not convenience store food. Our popcorn is for someone willing to spend just a little bit extra for an all-natural, gourmet, snack." Her hard work is starting to pay off. Michele's popcorn is now available for purchase at several gift and gourmet stores throughout New Hampshire, including Loudon's own Meadow Ledge Farm (for a complete list of retail outlets, see [MicheleSweetShoppe.com](http://MicheleSweetShoppe.com)).

Michele is a 55% owner in the company with her husband Dave, but make no mistake, this is a family business. Her oldest son's put his culinary arts education to work developing many of the savory flavors (for the record, Garlic Rosemary is Michele's personal savory favorite while Chocolate Coconut is her all-time favorite). Her son Seth and daughter Madison pitch in with packaging and shipping as needed. Dave works with Michele in product development and production and crunches the numbers.

Owning a small business has a great many rewards, but challenges also come with the territory. It takes resources to start a business and Michele and Dave have invested plenty of their own blood, sweat and dimes to make Michele's Sweet Shop a viable

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*Michele Holbrook puts together another of her many delicious snacks. She is best known for her many flavors of popcorn, which you can order online at [www.MicheleSweetShoppe.com](http://www.MicheleSweetShoppe.com).*



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entity. While the business is doing well, it needs working capital for continued growth; any income earned is immediately put back into running the company. As a result, Michele still works part time as the office manager for a child psychology practice in Nashua.

Finding a balance between work and family can also be a challenge. Especially since Michele is active with school activities for both Seth and Madison (Jessie is on his own) and she is a troop leader and Product Sale Manager for the Loudon Girl Scouts.

Long-term Michele hopes to resign from her office manager job to focus solely on developing and expanding Michele's Sweet Shoppe. Someday, she'd like to have a small production facility with a retail shop. "I want to be the one offering factory tours like Ben & Jerry's." In the short term She is focused on spreading the word about Michele's Sweet Shoppe's Totally Awesome Gourmet Popcorn. She's working with Mulberry Creek Imagery in Epsom to enhance her marketing materials and Mirror Lake Media, in Wolfeboro to add e-commerce capabilities to her web site to better serve her customers.

Michele continues to improve her products and her processes. She continues to research cost effective ways to grow her business while minimizing the financial risk. "It is all about measured steps. I'm a realist."

You can order Michele's Totally Awesome Gourmet Popcorn by visiting [michelesweetshoppe.com](http://michelesweetshoppe.com) or Meadow Ledge Farm. You can also call 603-798-5300 or email [michelesweetshop@tds.net](mailto:michelesweetshop@tds.net).

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