

Magnolia's Mule Kick makes community part of business plan

By William Gloster

After watching her mom-and-pop gas station in Taylor burn in the fall of 2017, business owner Christy Ouei and partner Burt Adams realized the cost to rebuild was prohibitive. The couple set their sights on opening a unique establishment in nearby Magnolia, one that would link the city and Columbia County with Southern Arkansas University (SAU). The business opened in June 2019 under the name Mule Kick and quickly became a major player in the community and economy of the region.

According to its website, www.mulekickmag.com, Mule Kick is “proud to offer unique pizza of the highest quality! From dairy free cheese to gluten-free crusts, we feature options so that everyone can enjoy our fare. In addition to the pizzas, we have coffee, ice cream and snacks all made inside the Natural State.” I sat down for a Q&A with Ouei to learn more about Mule Kick and its impact on the surrounding community.

Q: What is the driving goal of your business?

Ouei: Business models suggest that there be one featured area and one driving goal. While that may be best for many businesses, I could not adopt that for Mule Kick. Customers pay for an experience, and we aim for them to have that every time. Our beer doesn't take a backseat to our coffee, and our pizza doesn't sit in second behind the beer. We are all of those things equally. We are simply more than you expect us to be.

We are the first restaurant in our area to make a wholehearted effort to be green. Promoting products made in Arkansas not only cuts down on fuel requirements to bring in products from other states, but it highlights features of our state that Magnolians might not have known about otherwise.

In what ways does Mule Kick get involved with the city of Magnolia and SAU?

I want to let the community see us (all of us, managers and employees) working alongside them in Relay for Life, city cleanup days and homecoming events. We will not just be the pizza place on the north end of town.



PHOTO COURTESY MULE KICK

Mule Kick signage incorporates iconography familiar to anyone from Magnolia, home of the SAU Muleriders. It's just one way the business has aimed to not just serve the community but be a part of it.

We don't just have music on Saturday nights. We host trivia nights, comedy nights, painting on the patio, painting with a pro, classes to make reusable grocery bags out of old t-shirts, improv and talent shows. We sponsor many sporting events with SAU and Magnolia. I am on the board of the Magnolia Blossom Festival, Kiwanis Club as well as the Workforce Development Board.

Describe how Mule Kick connects with SAU students and prepares them to enter the workforce of the region.

In hiring primarily SAU students, we wanted to be the springboard for them into a job within their career. We felt like they needed structure in an environment where making mistakes was considered learning and not failing. When we decided on a [business] name, we hosted a logo contest among the junior and senior graphic arts majors. It gave us a great connection to the art department and gave three students published work for their portfolios.

I feel like college preparation (no matter how thorough) can only take you so far. Eventually you have to get out into the real world and experience it for yourself. Mule Kick shines in this aspect. I hired an accounting assistant that is now working for Murphy Oil as an accountant; my technical officer is now working full time for a bank as their technical officer. One of our team members, who is a bartender and my brand manager, has started his own clothing apparel line.

How have you adjusted your operations to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and what advice would you give to other business owners during this time?

The person I rely on most heavily now is my social media manager. She is the voice of Mule Kick to the world. We had a meeting right after we shut our doors and talked about how it was imperative that we remain visible to our customer base. We serve pizza and beer, but we also sell atmosphere, an atmosphere that we now have to give away for free so that we will still have customers on the other side of COVID-19.

I would also tell other business owners to not take this time for granted! We have all been given a reprieve (unwelcome as it may be) from the constant motion of being in business. Haven't had time to train that new staff? Now you do. Haven't balanced your checkbook in the last year? You have plenty of time. Got a crew that isn't connected as well? Have a potluck meal!

Mule Kick represents what small, local businesses can achieve when entrepreneurs integrate their distinct passions and ideas with the communities they serve. To learn more about the products and services offered by Mule Kick, visit www.mulekickmag.com.



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