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Finding success in fast food industry

Hayes now owner of 5 restaurants



Randy Hayes got his first fast-food job at a Wendy's in Hattiesburg in 1984. Like most 17-year-olds, he was motivated by a desire to earn his own money and gain valuable work experience in a fast-paced setting.

But while other teens often work such jobs for a couple of years before moving on to seemingly more lucrative pursuits, Hayes never left. Three decades after entering that Wendy's as a newbie, Hayes now is the owner of five Rally's and Checkers restaurants in metro Jackson and Laurel, making a career in a field many people see as not offering long-term, good-paying employment.

“You get to meet people, be a leader, be part of your community,” said Hayes, 47, who has four Rally’s restaurants in Jackson and Pearl and a Checkers in Laurel.

Hayes may not have known as a teenager that he would still be in the fast-food industry 30 years after starting in it, but he says he showed ambition from the time he was first hired. He recalled a regional manager coming to the Wendy’s where he worked and noticing the timer on the deep-fryer Hayes was working with had gone out and wondered why it hadn’t been replaced.

Hayes pointed out to the supervisor that the fries were floating on the surface of the frying oil, the main sign they had been successfully cooked, despite the timer issues.

“I didn’t come here to be an employee, I came here to be a manager,” Hayes said of his mindset in those days.

His bosses noticed. After a year, he joined the restaurant’s management program and was store manager by age 19. He cites his physical traits, such as his 6-foot-plus height — Hayes was a three-sport athlete at Hattiesburg High School — and his desire to learn and lead as perhaps the qualities that inspired belief from his superiors.

He left Wendy’s after four years but teamed with West Quality Foods in the early 1990s as part of Coastal Express, the official franchising group that operates the five restaurants. Hayes joined its leadership team in the mid-1990s and became Coastal Express’ owner in 2004.

“He’s a wonderful franchise partner. He’s incredibly ambitious, incredibly competitive,” says Jennifer Durham, Checkers’ vice president of franchise development. “What makes a great franchisee is someone who follows the system but also challenges us.” Hayes, she added, readily offers suggestions when either chain introduces new menu items or store designs, creating a healthy back-and-forth discussion.

The fast-food industry, like any other, has changed during Hayes’ time in the business. There are not only more fast-food competitors but also rivals in a fast-casual restaurant

segment, such as local successes Newk's and McAlister's Deli, largely nonexistent three decades ago. The industry has become front and center in the recent minimum-wage debate, marked by worker protests and calls from President Barack Obama for a higher federal minimum wage.

Hayes wouldn't comment on the minimum wage issue but noted rising costs over the years in a variety of areas mean his restaurants don't have the staffing they used to. He said his restaurants once averaged 25 employees on staff at peak business hours. That number is now eight, he said. Restaurants like his will have to continue stressing value-priced menu items to stay competitive, he said.

And despite the recession's impact on nonessential spending, Hayes said his stores' business has been flat at worst from year to year but mostly up. He was one of a group of Rally's and Checkers managers from 30 states rewarded last year with a Mediterranean cruise from the chains for achieving double-digit sales growth.

In the process, Durham says, Hayes has shown one can make a good, fulfilling living in fast food, something she admits is still a hard sell. But, she says, many Rally's and Checkers franchisers start out at entry-level positions. Some come from other countries and parlay the few dollars they crammed into their pockets when coming to America into success here.

"There's a stigma in our industry. It gets sold short, how fantastic an environment this can be," Durham said.