

Z's ENTERPRISES

Building an American Dream & A Family Legacy

Joey Zimmerman was a mere 17 years old when he bought Zip's Service Station at 10th and Williams on June 4, 1977. It was just a couple of weeks after his graduation from Great Bend High School.

That first transaction led to nine more and today Zimmerman owns 10 businesses, including six convenience stores, in Great Bend and Ellinwood.

"I bought Zip's Service from my dad, the late Don (Zip) Zimmerman; he built it on this corner in 1968," Zimmerman said. "As the years went by, I knew I wanted to get the third generation involved."

He got what he wanted – in spades.

Employees of the family business include: Brent and Abby Zimmerman, son and daughter-in-law; Meredith Joiner, daughter; Jared Zimmerman, son; Georgia Zimmerman, daughter; and new son-in-law Nick Schwager. Joey's wife, Sara, is president of Zip's Oil on Railroad Avenue. "Sara has been instrumental in all our ventures," her husband said. "She was there from the beginning to do bookkeeping and even wash cars. And she has been understanding about my work schedule, which I'm sure wasn't easy for her."

Joey is president of the service station, six Zip Stops, Z's Liquor, and Z's Service Inc., which is a trucking company on Railroad Avenue that he bought in 2008. It was the last business he purchased. "My dad was self-employed and I wanted to do the same. I wanted to work for myself and be my own boss," he said.

During his first two years at Zip's Service, Zimmerman was the only employee. "I ran this by myself for those two years, seven days a week, from opening to closing. "And that was when it was full-service for everything, including vehicle repair and maintenance. We were open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.," he added.

Zimmerman said that back in 1977, there were no convenience stores in Great Bend. The first one, Dart In on Washington Street, came along around 1980. At the same time, there were 22 service stations.

The first expansion of Zimmerman's enterprise came in 1985, when he bought the service station in Ellinwood. The following year, he purchased the convenience store at 19th and Main. "I bought the convenience stores from competitors at good locations such as 10th and Main, 19th and Main and 10th and Grant," Zimmerman recalled. "But demographics change. For example, the traffic count varies because of changes in neighboring businesses.

"And there is more competition today. I never had a problem competing with grocery stores and big box stores. But then some started tying gas prices into the amount of groceries you buy. Therefore, our volume is going down."



Joey and Sara Zimmerman, owners of the numerous Z's businesses, pose for a photo with their adult children and their team members. Meredith Joiner, Joey's daughter, is pictured in the center wearing a favorite plaid shirt that belonged to Ronald "Roon" Zimmerman, Joey's brother that passed away in January after battling cancer. "It really is a family business, and we treat our employees that way too," Meredith says.

In response, Zimmerman offers discounts on gasoline – six cents off a gallon with cash and three cents off with a debit card. "We do this every day, and there is no keeping track of points or cards," Zimmerman said. "And we don't make you patronize our other businesses."

Zimmerman credits his employees with much of his success over the years. Of his 40 current employees, one has been with the business for 36 years. Others are in the 20-plus-year range, and "quite a few" have been on the job for more than 10 years. "We wouldn't be here without them," he said. "We owe our success to all the employees and to our banker. Bill Robbins at Farmers Bank & Trust has always treated me like a son. He can be hard on me but good to me at the same time."

Another aspect of Zimmerman's success is that "I understood duplication. Even as a kid, I knew I wanted multiple locations."

But before that could happen, Zimmerman had to train himself. For instance, "I learned how to run the gas station; then I got a second gas station. Then I taught someone else. Next came a convenience store and I learned how to run that.

"I was able to take these skills and teach them to others. You have to know what you are doing and be willing to delegate. I can't be in 100 places at once. There is a lot of multi-tasking. I always try to think three steps ahead. I have to."

The Zimmermans were born and raised in Great Bend, "which has been good to us. A recent survey indicated 4,000 people a day patronize our locations. "And I like to think we have been good for Great Bend too," Zimmerman added. "We have integrity and a good reputation."

Zimmerman still works seven days a week and tackles the same jobs as his employees do. "I'm in my 40th year in business. Maybe I will slow down one of these years and let the kids handle it."

