

Dick and Deanna Freeland



Early in their marriage, Richard (Dick) Freeland was working three jobs, Deanna Freeland was working a full-time job outside the home, and the couple was raising three children.

“We were just two kids trying to make a living,” Dick says. “We didn’t have the money to send ourselves to college, so we were busy making a living for our growing family.”

With drive and an entrepreneurial spirit, the Freelands worked hard and took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves. Today, as a result, the Freelands own 44 Pizza Huts and 3 KFCs in northeast Indiana and Ohio, and they employ 2,100 people.

For the Freelands, early life started in Iowa where both were working at Meredith Publishing in Des Moines. It was Meredith Publishing that Dick and Deanna met and they were married in 1958 and began to build their family shortly after. “Our dreams at that time were simply to ‘survive.’ We were caring for a new baby and trying to buy the things we needed to continue growing our family,” Deanna says. “At one time, I was doing ornamental ironwork, I was doing computer work for a grocery wholesaler, and I was laying sod, while Deanna also worked full-time,” Dick says.

The decision to save money for a belated honeymoon after 10 years of marriage was one turning point for the Freelands. “We decided to charge our gas purchases so if we had an emergency, we would have the cash. When we got home, we still had that cash we had set aside for gas; instead of using it for the credit card bill, though, we put it in the bank and I got another job to pay the credit card,” Dick says.

That job was working at a Pizza Hut in Des Moines for \$1.25 an hour. After he’d earned the \$200 to pay the credit cards, Dick stayed on at Pizza Hut and worked part-time for two years. During that time, he was working 30 hours a week at Pizza Hut and another 40 hours at his full-time job as an ironworker. Dick says. “After I’d been at Pizza Hut for two years, the franchise manager was killed in an accident and they needed someone to run one of his stores. It was difficult to leave the good wages I was making as a full-time ironworker, but I saw this as an opportunity I didn’t want to pass up.”

The Freelands deliberated the decision, and say they “never contemplated that this change would turn out the way it has. Pizza Hut was not a public company then, but after managing the store, we were given the opportunity to open company-owned stores.”

The rest, as they say, is history. The Freelands were soon operating 11 stores in Des Moines, at that time the top Pizza Hut area in the nation. After opening company-owned stores, the Freelands began opening their own stores as the company continued to grow and offer managers new opportunities to become independent franchise store owners. Dick says. “We were running both company-owned stores and our own franchise stores. At that time, I was also the field representative for a three-state area.”

The Freelands worked hard and they continued to grow their Pizza Hut business. When the corporate officers at Pizza Hut decided to pursue inclusion on the New York Stock Exchange, it became a conflict of interest for people like the Freelands to own their own stores and operate company-owned stores. As a result, they had to sell the company-owned stores back to Pizza Hut and select a territory in the nation in which to establish their own franchise operations.

“We got the open territory maps and looked at the cities we could select,” Deanna says. “We pointed to Fort Wayne, Indiana, visited the city, and loved it. In 1972, the Freelands opened their first Fort Wayne Pizza Hut on East State Street. The lease was co-signed by Pizza Hut president Frank Carney because, as Dick says, “we didn’t have assets on our balance sheet to satisfy the lenders.”

“Yes, we were scared to death when we opened that first Hut,” Dick says. “We had no contingency plan and we were just hoping people would show up and buy a pizza. It was make-or-break time for us.”

Their fears were unfounded, because people did show up and buy pizza. In fact, they bought enough pizza to make the Freeland’s first Pizza Hut the first half-million dollar volume store in the United States. Pizza Hut ownership and operation truly was a family affair for the Freelands.

“The kids were right there working hard,” Deanna says. “Kim, Terri, and Todd were with us every step of the way.”

By 1978, the Freelands owned nine Pizza Hut restaurants, including one in Noblesville which they had opened to keep the territory they wanted. They continued opening more Pizza Huts as well as pursue a new opportunity. In 1999, the Freelands accepted an opportunity from the corporate owner of Pizza Hut, which also owns KFC and Taco Bell, to further develop the Fort Wayne KFC franchise. “It was natural for the company to ask us if we wanted to do this because we were so successful with our Pizza Huts,” Dick says. “The franchisee

for Fort Wayne wasn't ready to take on more stores and we were interested in stretching in a new direction, so it has been a good development for all of us."

In addition to serving residents the pizza and KFC foods they have come to enjoy, the Freelands enjoy giving back to their community. "We encourage our staff to be involved in the city because being part of our community is what it's all about," Dick says. "We've also been active in politics because it allows us to support our nation's free enterprise system and the elected officials who run our communities and our nation."