

Will to Win

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Judith Williams owns several businesses, including two franchise locations of Fifi's Fine Resale Apparel in east Manatee County. Her businesses produce more than \$6 million in annual sales.

Clarence Nash laid it all out during his retirement speech after a 42-year career trussing mattresses in an Ohio factory.

A member of the Greatest Generation, Nash was the type who walked to work when his car broke down. He never called in sick. He sometimes held one or two other jobs to support his wife and four kids. And when he retired, recalls one daughter, Judith Williams, he said "if the good Lord will give me a few years where I can be happy, that will be a good thing."

Now a successful east Manatee County-based entrepreneur, with businesses that stretch from lumber supply to high-end clothes on consignment, Williams remembers her dad's speech well. It was poignant motivation.

"I thought, 'how sad,'" says Williams, who was in her young 20s that day in 1983. "That's when I knew I wanted to do something that makes me happy. And I knew I wanted to work and make my own money. I didn't want to rely on anyone else to support me."

Williams, now 54, has made good on that promise, doing it with the unique conglomerate of growth businesses. She has also developed a reputation, from customers, employees and peers, for nonstop energetic devotion to becoming a better entrepreneur.

The companies Williams runs, which total more than \$6 million in annual sales, include JL Williams Co., a lumber supply and plastics brokerage, and Fifi Consignment Fine Resale Furniture Home Décor & Apparel. Williams runs the \$5 million lumber and plastic business from home, while she's a franchisee with Apollo Beach-based Fifi's, a chain of consignment stores with 16 Florida locations.

"She's incredible," says Adam Szopinski, a former Toys 'R' Us executive who retired in east Manatee County and is now Williams' neighbor. "The level of energy she puts into the business is out of this world."

Fifi Queen, who founded Fifi's in 1986 and has owned several other companies, adds that Williams is Donald Trump-like in her zeal for a business deal. "I run real fast, but she runs faster than I do," says Queen, a onetime model and top-ranked golfer. "There's nothing she can't do. And if someone tells her she can't do it, that's not going to work with her."

Williams, who graduated high school but never went to college, says she mostly learned her entrepreneurial instincts on the job. Her other education comes from attendance at Zig Ziglar-like motivation sessions, the ones, she says, that "pump you up and get you moving."

That's how Williams honed one of the keys to her success: The power of positive thinking, especially when it comes to employees. The first agenda item at a quarterly strategy session Williams holds for her consignment business, for example, is straight from that theory. That's when every employee picks a name of another out of a hat and has to say something positive about that person. Her two Fifi's stores have 22 employees.

Model franchisee

Williams has also refined her entrepreneurial mindset over the last 30 years. She worked in retail when she was a young adult, and before lumber and Fifi's she co-owned a few small businesses in Ohio with her husband, Rich Williams. Those included a pizza franchise, a sub shop and an ice cream store.

"I never felt like I was talented in something," Williams says. "I don't sculpt or paint. But I'm very passionate about being in business."

Williams seems to have found both her true passion and a genuine niche with Fifi's, the most commercially visible of her business entities. She opened her first Fifi's in spring 2011, in a Publix-anchored strip mall in Lakewood Ranch, just east of Interstate 75 in Manatee County.

The consignment model, thought Williams, where people resell worn, and occasionally new goods, from shoes to hats, would be a timely hit given the economic downturn. The fact that she doesn't pay for inventory, a piece that often bogs down independent retailers, is another significant parcel of the strategy. That allows Williams to put more money into other expenses, like rent for a top location and labor.

Williams splits the proceeds of sales: If the item sells for more than \$100 it's a 50-50 share, while if it's less than \$100, the store gets 60%. Some days the store will get up to 500 new items to sort through for consignment. "Most people who come in here can't believe it's used," says Williams. "It's amazing what people say they no longer want."

That's another integral part of the strategy because Williams says her business only works with quality merchandise. "I didn't want to be looked at like junk or a thrift shop," says Williams. "I wanted people to bring in their high-end couture, their Louis Vuitton, their Chanel, their mink coats."

Shopping Queen

Resale is the new trend in retail.

That's the theory Apollo Beach-based entrepreneur Fifi Queen uses to back her ambitious growth strategy at Fifi's Fine Resale Apparel, a chain of high-end consignment shops. Queen says she intends to open 75 stores in the next five years, a combination of franchise and corporate locations, projecting that high-end bargain shopping will be an industry staple, not a fad. "(Traditional) retail is dead," Queen says, "but we are bringing retail back."

The Gulf Coast is central to Queen's expansion plan: the region is already home to nine of the 16 Florida Fifi's locations, including a new corporate-owned location that opened this month in South Tampa. Queen says another Tampa corporate-owned store, focused solely on furniture and home goods, is scheduled to open later this year.

Queen also went high-end with the expansion. She bought racks for the first Tampa store, for instance, from the Saks Fifth Avenue that recently closed at the WestShore Plaza in Tampa.

Queen founded Fifi's in 1986 outside Jacksonville and she launched a franchise and licensing unit in 2007. There are currently 24 locations, split between the 16 in Florida and eight in North Carolina. Queen, through the corporate office, runs all the North Carolina locations and seven of the Florida stores. Franchisees or Fifi's license holders own the nine other Florida Fifi's.

The success, says Queen, stems from a combination of branding, personalized boutique-style customer service and, most significantly, the ability to give shoppers a deal. Customers, says Queen, put a big emphasis on the treasure-hunt aspect of the stores. "None of the stores have the same inventory," Queen says. "That's what makes it so intriguing."

Success Tips

Entrepreneur Judith Williams turned a pair of consignment stores that sell high-end goods, Fifi's, into a \$1.5 million business in two years. Here are some of her tips on how to grow a startup:

Start slow. Don't borrow money, if possible.

Be diligent about keeping a stellar credit rating, always pay bills on time and eventually money will be offered at no interest;

Don't be an absentee owner. "Employees will care about your business if they see that you care about them," Williams says.

Avoid the trap of outfitting a business with all new gear. Says Williams: "There are lots of ways to build out your store with good used equipment."

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