

Isaac Meek:

Hi, we're Isaac and Stephanie Meek.

Stephanie Meek:

We own Five Daughters Bakery in Nashville, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia, and we are actually the parents of five daughters.

Isaac Meek:

It's incredible.

Stephanie Meek:

We started Five Daughters Bakery in 2015. Well, a little bit before that. In 2014, I was pregnant with our fifth daughter, and Isaac and I were in the crank of a 9:00 to 5:00 job. I was a stay-at-home mom, but Isaac was...

Isaac Meek:

I was a working accountant, and we were going through a period in time where we knew that something needed to change and we weren't really sure what. I remember Steph coming into the room and just challenging me and saying, what does God want you to do? I got upset with her, but I was like, you know what? I'm just going to pray and ask God. I threw up this strange prayer. I was just like, God, what do you want me to do? I wasn't ceremonious about it at all, and I remember immediately hearing God say that I could bake and do music, which as an accountant was kind of like, wait, what? Those are the things that I love to do, but they weren't things that I'd ever actually made any money doing. I went out to Steph and I was like, I'm going to tell her this. She's going to laugh at me. Then I'm going to go back to like planning on how to get a different job than the job that I have, but I told her and immediately she said, great. Let's do that.

It was just like this weight lifted off of my shoulders. I had this partner with me and I didn't know what we were going to do, but I knew that we were going to do it together. Not long after that, honestly a few days after that, we had a friend who was like, you guys should try to make a donut. We live in Nashville, Tennessee, and he was like, there are no great donuts in Nashville. If you made a gourmet donut, I think you'd kill it. Yeah. We tried it. We tried it in our house. The first day that we did it was January 8th, 2015. By January 17th, we were selling in a local coffee shop. It was the greatest, craziest time of our life.

The why behind Five Daughters really goes to us and our family. I had worked almost a decade as an accountant and all that we really wanted to do was be together, so we didn't really know that this was going to work, but what we knew was that we were going to get to do it together. It was just that togetherness that allowed us to grow in safety in our home and fail together and try together, but doing it together. From the get go, the foundational element of Five Daughters Bakery for Stephanie and I was family and being together. We've allowed that to translate as our business has grown. It's kind of translated differently over time, but the root cause of us valuing our family and then us seeing our employees and allowing them to value their families hasn't stopped at all. It's created a really beautiful synergy in our community.

Stephanie Meek:

Yeah. The greater mission of it is teaching our daughters how to be entrepreneurial, how to grow something from the roots up and how to treat people well. For them to see their parents in leadership doing something together, loving people and just reaching out to the community, the different communities we get to serve has kind of taught them how to be and interact in the world. Yeah. From the top down, it's missional, it's relational, it's about connection, and about family. There are four key values at Five Daughters Bakery, but our core value and mission is to be the light and exude God into the community everywhere we go, but our first one is make it better.

Isaac Meek:

Make it better. Make it better is honestly... it's hard to say which one's my favorite. It's like picking a favorite kid, which we never do, but make it better, if you're trying to have a business, make it better is like the secret sauce of whatever you're doing, because it actually leaves room for mistakes. If there's no room for mistakes, if there's no room for failure, then there's no room to make it better either. From day one, we didn't know what we were doing. We weren't from the restaurant background. From day one, we had that kind of bandwidth there and that idea that I know that what I'm doing right now is getting the job done, but I can make it better. As we've grown, the more we've realized that's applicable in every area. It doesn't matter if you're in the kitchen or if you're in the office, if you're in accounting. No matter what you're doing, as long as you're willing to fail and to try something new, you can make it better. That's really, for me, that's our top line core value.

Stephanie Meek:

Also, it taps into that relational element of synergy. Whenever you're working in a certain department at Five Daughters, you can make the entire organization better by synergizing with somebody across the board, in the kitchen or in media or in administration. It's really about playing off of each other and using each other's strengths and acknowledging your weaknesses so that you can make the organization better.

Isaac Meek:

Another one of ours that ties closely into that is I would say flexibility.

Stephanie Meek:

Absolutely.

Isaac Meek:

That has been one that has, honestly, I wouldn't say it's single handedly saved our marriage, but at the same time, it's been relationally very helpful to make one of your core values, one of your guideposts being flexible, because plans change. Things change all the time.

Stephanie Meek:

People make mistakes.

Isaac Meek:

The more brutal you are, the more a chance you have to break. Whereas if you're flexible, you can kind of go with the flow, which also helps you get further faster, so flexibility is definitely another one of our core values as a group.

Stephanie Meek:

It also shows grace to others, which again, taps into that relational area because it's so easy to think, why can't they do things the way that I would want them to do it? If you're flexible, it extends more grace. Then there's fun. We keep it light at Five Daughters Bakery. Obviously there's work to be done. There are donuts to be made, but in the kitchen, it's one of our core values. If it's not fun, then it's not working. We need to be flexible and be there for each other. When people come into the bakery, we want them to feel the joy. We want them to feel the lightness of this is a family environment. You can bring people here from milestones, engagements, we've done several weddings, and we just are so honored to be a part of those people's lives in that way. We've had baby announcements. It's a fun environment.

Isaac Meek:

It is a fun environment, but I enjoy us as the leaders of the organization making having fun part of the tenants, because I've worked too many jobs that could have been fun if the right people were there, but usually weren't fun because that wasn't the environment that they wanted to create. Honestly, the more fun that you're having, typically, the joy spreads, the more typically that new ideas pop out, the more typically that you retain the people that you want to retain. That's another one of our core tenants.

Stephanie Meek:

I just have a memory of us dancing in the kitchen, and Simon Sinek has a quote it's like, "Out of chaos, breeds creativity." Some of the best creative ideas have come out of the kitchen hours at like 4:00 AM in the morning where people are dancing and they're like, let's do this on a donut. That was bred out of fun.

Isaac Meek:

Another one of our core values is tension, and tension is one of those values that seems like it would be a negative thing, but instead we found within our organization that it's extremely positive, because without the tension, it's hard to actually foster any growth. The tension actually creates the structure around the environment and it pushes us forward. What I found is that when there are situations where there's literally no tension, that's usually a really flat, just dry scenario and it needs new life. Right. We sort of use tension between us to drive our vision.

Stephanie Meek:

Tension is in growth and we've had a lot of growing pains throughout our business, but it's also like momentum. There's lots of tension in a marriage, and that actually creates team effort because we're like, we're tackling the problem, not each other. The tension is good because we're moving forward in that momentum.

Isaac Meek:

We've made a lot of mistakes in our business. Honestly, a lot of people will ask the question, what's the biggest mistake that you've ever made? I usually like to stop people right there and say, we make mistakes all the time. Quite frankly, I will be sad or scared when the day ever comes that we're no longer making mistakes. Mistakes actually mean that you're trying something new, that you're trying and

risking something. Errors are different. Repeated errors are much different, but mistakes are actually really good.

One of the biggest mistakes that we ever made by far, it was a seven figure mistake, was going to the state of Florida to a vacation town that didn't fit with our model. The people liked our donuts, but we were coming from just a different place. We were coming from Nashville, Tennessee, Atlanta, Georgia. Then we were like, let's do this in a vacation town, and it was completely different, and because it didn't work, we lost some money, but we also had to reimagine what growth looks like. If we hadn't had that failure in Florida, we wouldn't have the model that we have currently for growth. I can look at that mistake and go, oh God, I just wish I could go back and change it and just not do that one thing, but in reality, that one thing, if we'd been able to make it work, it would be way worse than if we could've just made the mistake and then gotten better from it.

We've grown from being just a husband and wife in our house to a team of almost 150 employees. I think that the biggest key that we've had in that growth was the idea and the model that every person can have a bunch of jobs, but you need to eventually have just one job that's your job. In the very beginning I was doing everything and Stephanie was doing everything, but we've had in mind the model of, okay, I'm going to find somebody else who's going to take this and somebody else who's going to take that and somebody else who's going to take that until I'm doing just the job that I need to do for our business.

It's slow at first. It really is. At first it's hard to get from 30 jobs down to one, but it's honestly the hardest to get from 30 to 29 because you just don't want to give up that control. You're like, I did it better, but the reality is that once you start allowing other people to grow and to take those jobs from you, you actually expand the amount that you can do and you find people who can do it better than you did.

Stephanie Meek:

Exactly.

Isaac Meek:

We've been extraordinarily blessed that now we're at a place, six years later where instead of doing all the jobs, which legitimately it was like 35 jobs, I only have one job that I have to do, which is visionary for our business, and you only have one job that you have to do, which it's a big job, it's marketing, but at the same time, you have the people underneath you that execute for you. Anybody who's trying to scale... right now we're at six stores. Six stores in six years, but we're positioned to where we can jump to 20 stores by next year and to 150 stores by the year after that, but I couldn't have seen that in the vision of how to do it had I still been doing all the jobs.

Stephanie Meek:

Growing your business actually takes a lot of letting go. It means running your company with open hands and knowing that you're going to have to trust people, and that's how you can strategize to grow.

Isaac Meek:

Five Daughters Bakery 10 years from now should probably look like 50 Daughters Bakery, or more.

Stephanie Meek:

No. This actual kitchen is closed, but we will continue to expand our kitchens around the US. God actually showed me a picture of all these locations lighting up on the map of the United States. Our plan is to grow from one region to the next. Currently we're in the Southeast and then we'll take that model and that brand to the next region.

Isaac Meek:

Yeah. I'll say that if you're trying to grow and scale a small business, the more that you can actually refine your business to the point where you don't have to do anything else, you can just focus on vision, the better your chances are of actually being able to grow in a healthy state. We've had many people approach us trying to help us grow quick. As we've gone down those roads and those talks, quick growth usually means compromises. It usually means someone else's vision. If that's what you're looking for, then great. There's plenty of people who will tell you their vision of how you should do your business, but in my opinion, especially if you really care about your business, like our business is named after our girls, we really care, we want it to continue to translate our values and our culture and who we are. In order to do that, we've been working towards having a model that we don't have to touch and we can go, yes, this is working. Let's grow from here. That's our plan.

Stephanie Meek:

Keeping the integrity of our model as we grow. Building a team, we've been under the model of there are so many jobs and then we do a lot of the jobs and then we actually pull back and extend leadership and authority to people so that they can lead teams. Because we're a relational company, we really want to be able to know who's in charge and also pour into them, but we can't know everybody. I think the biggest thing about leadership is being seen and being known and making sure that your people are seen and known. When we bring people in, we want to help them feel that way, but like I said, we can't do that all the time, so we employ people that we really love and then we pour into them and then we empower them to empower others.

Isaac Meek:

Exactly. You can lead people, but you can't lead people you can't see. They can be following you potentially, but at the same time, if you want to actually be a leader that's not leaving a bunch of people behind, you've got to be able to see the people and know who they are. Quite frankly, the more that you grow, the harder that is. Yeah. I remember our first year, we had at the end of the year, I think we had 15 employees, and we got Christmas cards from all of them. We got so much love. You guys are the greatest. Then our second year, our team was up to almost 60. Instead of us getting those cards, it was our leaders and we got like five cards from leaders. At first I was like, oh man, I should know every person, but that's not actually a sustainable model for growth.

What's a sustainable model for growth is empowering your leaders. We've been blessed finding leaders that we can trust by knowing some of the people that we hired early on, but that only will take you so far. The real secret is actually trusting people and allowing them to fail and allowing them to get back up and watching it. We use a model of holding an employee with an open hand. Almost everyone that I ever hired, I told them, I don't expect you to work for me for forever. I don't know if you'll work for me for one day or six months or 10 years, but I'm going to hold you like this because if God calls you on or God gives you a different dream, I don't want to stop. I don't want to stop that. I want you to be able to go.

When you actually do make a practice of holding your team like this, your leaders like this, they take it into their heart and they transfer that on to the people that they're leading. What's happened is

over time, the people that connect with us and that resonate with that, they rise up and the group grows. Instead of having two people that you knew and that you could trust, because that's all that you knew in your small business, you have 10 or you get 15 or 20, but it takes time for those leaders to rise up. They can only do that when you hold them like this.

Stephanie Meek:

When they resonate with the culture, like you said. This is a launching pad. This signifies we're not here to control you. We're here to empower you, and then they empower others. We try to bring in, pull in, pray in people who are like-minded and understand the culture. If they don't, then they fall off and that's okay, because this is the launching pad.

Isaac Meek:

I will say that we've held a lot of people like this and we've been hurt. We've been hurt by many people, but at the same time, our group and our circle has grown with many more people who are actually with us. It's not like a safe thing to do. It's safer to hold people like this, but at the same time, that squeezes all the life out of an organization. I'd recommend holding your people like that.

Operating in a spirit of excellence in our business is one of the things that we care the most about. I want to be careful when I say this because we don't expect excellence as in no failures. I said that earlier as in perfection, but excellence as in whatever we do, we want it to be the best that it can be. One of the easy ways that translates is with ingredients. We use literally the best ingredients. The butter that we use in our donuts costs us 10 times more than the butter that has been tried to be pushed on us by reps and the butter that we've been told is what everyone else uses, but we want the very best. What we see is that then our employees go, hey, they use the very best. Then our customers go, this tastes better. That one little choice translates into a culture that we want and a community that we love.

Stephanie Meek:

Of excellence.

Isaac Meek:

Of excellence. That's one example, but the more that you see places where you go, you know what, we can be better. This is make it better, because we want to be excellent. If you're not striving towards that, then you're honestly setting yourself up to fail.

We've been very blessed to have a high degree of success in our business, and it's not lost on me that a lot of that really, honestly came from above. I do think though that many times throughout our life in the lead up, we were learning things along the way that have contributed to our success. I know that me being an accountant for 10 years actually really helps in this business. Stephanie, she has literally a history of knowing the market and knowing the trends of people, and that has helped contribute to this.

I think a lot of people really despise whatever season that they're in at the moment, so kind of flipping that switch into your head and going, I don't know, but maybe I should just get really good at this because it's going to come back and help me someday. For us, anyway, that's been one of the main things that's been a secret to our success. God's definitely blessed us, but also, we spent seven years as youth pastors. That helped in team building. I spent 10 years as an accountant. That helps in not going

out of business and charging the right amount of money. There's a lot of things that when I was in those other seasons, I wouldn't have guessed, but looking back, I can go, oh wow.

The other thing that I'll say is that we make a habit of going, we're not the smartest people in the room. I know that's not new news to probably any of you, but at the same time, every other business owner that I ever worked for, even though he'd say I'm not the smartest in the room, that wasn't how he acted. That wasn't how they operated their businesses. Consciously, we've gone out and sought out other restaurateurs that we admire, other pastry chefs that we admire, other people that are just good leaders that we admire. That's probably what you're doing right now is seeking out that additional information that's like a guiding post that you can aim towards. The more that you have those, the clearer it is as you progress in your business.

Stephanie Meek:

Yeah. I would say don't despise the season you're in or the training that you're getting right now, because it is going to launch you into the next season of what you're trying to create in your business to do it excellently. Also, don't despise the connections and the people that are in your life now, because you never know who will have a skill that will be beneficial to your business later.

Isaac Meek:

If you want to go from working 80 or 120 or as many hours as you're working right now down to four or eight, the only way that I'm aware of to do that is to actually let go of all the things that you're trying to do. The more that you try to do, the harder it is for you to actually step back and see vision. For me anyway, I'm in a place now where I get to work four to eight hours a week. All that I'm really doing is stepping back and checking the vision, checking in with my leaders and then dreaming and thinking about what's next.

I love being in this position, but that wasn't possible when I was working 120 hours a week, sleeping no more than three hours at a time, which is part of it usually for most small businesses. There usually is a season where you have to hustle, you have to work hard, but your goal needs to be work hard and release the jobs. Work hard and give it to someone else within your organization. The first person that I hired, officially hired, I paid more than I paid myself. We had him for a year, and it was a great piece of our growth in order to do that, but it was also a risk. You do have to be willing to take those risks. You have to be willing to work hard with the forethought that I'm working hard now so that I can have bandwidth later.

Stephanie Meek:

It goes back to trusting people too. When you let go, you have to trust people, and that comes with good training as well. You're teaching people with the end in mind. I've heard it said that people wear different hats in life. I feel like all of our hats are revolving; that work and life and the balance of it all goes together. Like we've been saying, we don't do it all. We have a lot of help, so we tap into the sources that have poured into our life, and I think that takes a lot of wisdom to stop when you're supposed to stop and go when you're supposed to go. For us, it's always been guarding our family, guarding our personal time and guarding our marriage especially. I think we learned that early on, especially when we were starting the business. We wanted to do this together and God built it with us. When those things start feeling out of balance and out of whack, we come back to the beginning of whose business does this belong to and what is our main goal in mind?

Isaac Meek:

If you have the main goal in mind, it does make things easier. Obviously every personality type can be different. I will say that one of the practical things that has helped us is that we have lanes. Stephanie is in charge of our social media. If I think that the social media should be this way, but she thinks it's that way, that's not my lane. That's her lane. I'm in charge of the taste of the donuts. I'm not in charge of how they look. That actually has to go through social media, but it's my lane. Actually, if you're working together with somebody and you want some work life balance in that sense, establishing your lanes and going, you know what, even if we disagree, like I'm just going to not, because that's yours. If you disagree with me, you're not because this is mine. That's actually been helpful to us.

Another thing that's been helpful to us is to actually set times of just going, hey, at this time, work's done. Especially in a small business, work can always be done, so having an accountability person who can just help you shut it down is exceptionally helpful. Then having five little girls who want your attention too is helpful. If any of you're thinking about it, it's pretty awesome.

Stephanie Meek:

If you're good at boundaries, you'll be good at having children because you have to set boundaries for your children and it helps you set boundaries in your business and work life. In building our business, we have had to have great humility along the journey. I would just say that if you're building something from the ground up, just continue to humble yourself and go back to what you really want to accomplish with the end in mind. Think about your why and let God be the wind beneath your wings in that situation. As you grow, allow yourself to trust people. Allow yourself to have people support you and guide you along the way.

Isaac Meek:

One of the things that has really been impressed upon me lately in my thinking is little league baseball. In little league baseball, if you have one star player, you can win your little league. One really amazing player, you can win, but as you keep going, that one amazing player doesn't get you much further. If you go to college or if you go to the minor leagues, and especially once you get to the major leagues, you don't want somebody who's really great at pitching playing catcher. You don't want somebody who's really great at pitching playing the outfield or vice versa.

What I've seen is a lot of business owners who are really great. They're great enough to have a great small business, but they're not great enough to be a great big business, but they're unwilling to move to the next league. If you're in a small town or even a big town and your small business is kind of stuck, I'd like to challenge you that potentially you need more great players and you need to recognize where you actually fit in the group, because it's fine if you're an incredible athlete, but you can't do it all. You actually need a team to grow. That's my advice.

Stephanie Meek:

Playing off of the sports thing, be a really good cheerleader. Allow yourself to be cheered on and cheer your people on like it's your main job. Just be their number one fan and people will grow and your business will grow.

Isaac Meek:

This is how we've done our business, and we're very honored for you to take the time to be with us. We just hope that you take some of the things that we've said to heart, especially the part about being humble and encouraging your team.

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Stephanie Meek:

Yeah. We're your biggest cheerleaders and your biggest fans here. We want you to know that it takes a lot of work to build and grow a business, and it's not for the faint of heart. We just want to encourage you guys not to give up. Do not grow weary in doing good, for in due season, you will reap a harvest if you don't give up, so stay the course, stay encouraged, be good to each other and cheer on your team big time. We're cheering for you.