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Larry Stafford received the Entrepreneur of the Year Innovative Award from the Tulare County Economic Development Corporation.

Chocolate dreams

Stafford's Famous Chocolate of Porterville earns countywide recognition

By AARON BURGIN
THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

Local chocolatier Larry Stafford said that his wife asked him 19 years ago why he chose the word "Famous" as part of his chocolate shop's name.

"I told her that I knew that 'Stafford's Famous Chocolate'

would be famous," the 59-year-old entrepreneur said.

Flash forward to 2006, and it could be argued that Stafford's prediction was pretty accurate.

Stafford was recently named the Tulare County Economic Development Corporation's Entrepreneur of the Year Innovative Award recipient, adding to the list of accolades the chocolate shop located next to the Henderson Avenue Save Mart has received.

Stafford said his business' success is derived from always

striving to be at the cutting edge of the chocolate-making business, contriving confections that your average chocolatier wouldn't think of.

For example, Stafford points to his newest creations for Easter — chocolate Easter bunnies.

Sounds pretty mundane, right?

Wrong, said Stafford.

One look at the intricacy of his rabbits, the facial expressions, the texture, the decoration, Stafford said, and you will

see what he means.

Stafford's creativity can also be seen in some of his signature sweets, like the "Ooey Goopy Bar."

Stafford claims that no other chocolatier has the confection, a large marshmallow sandwiched between thin layers of peanut butter and caramel, dipped in chocolate and finally sprinkled with almonds.

Innovation was at the heart of the Tulare County award, as was entrepreneurship.

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STAFFORD'S: Every day brings risk

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Risk was among the criteria for receiving the award: the proprietor had to accept a high level of personal, professional or financial risk to pursue the opportunity.

Stafford said he takes risks every time his store opens at 10 a.m.

"It's not just about having a good product, it's also about being able to sell it," Stafford said.

He spins an anecdote of a person who built a doughnut shop downtown, and put very little advertising behind his business.

"I asked him, 'How are you advertising it?'" Stafford said. "The guy told me, the people will come once they taste the doughnuts."

The man went out of business in three months, Stafford said.

The moral of the story: no matter how many Ooey Gooy, Mooey Gooy, divinities and tasty turtles you can stir up, you have to sell your product, Stafford said.

How does Stafford sell his product?

By getting involved. With the schools, with the community, any way possible, he said.

Like the Willie-Wonka inspired contest he had last year when "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" was bringing in big bucks at the box office.

While the "oompa loompas" were making a comeback, Stafford asked children 5-12 years old to create their own Willie Wonka bars.

He fielded 200 creations.

The winner: the "Gazonkachunkawonka bar," which was caramel topped with white-chunk chocolate and a macadamia nut, made by a third-grade student.

"And it is things like that that

get the word out about us," Stafford said.

And how the word has spread.

Propped next to Stafford's seat are several boxes addressed to Granite Bay, Redding and Bakersfield.

Stafford said he has sent chocolate as far as Iraq.

"We were shipping 100 boxes a day during Christmas time," Stafford said. "And on Valentine's Day, we had a line clear out of the store."

Forgive him if he sounds over-confident, Stafford said.

This is who he is — confident in everything he does, with a desire to not just play on the teams, but to be the team leader, the team captain.

He was the captain, actually. On the football and baseball teams at Porterville High School, where he is enshrined as a hall-of-famer.

Stafford boasts that he could have been a heck of a professional baseball player, but the career barely eluded him.

"That's how I live my life, I want to be the best, and it is no different in the chocolate business, because this is my love," Stafford said. "Who wouldn't want to love what they do and be the best at it?"

The EDC's award ranks up there with the 1998 outstanding business award from the Porterville Chamber of Commerce and his win at the International Chocolate Expo the same year, Stafford said.

Those titles grace the gold seals that are on most of his candy boxes.

"I am very proud of what we have accomplished here," Stafford said, "and it is all possible by the support from my family, my employees and the

community who have really made my dream a reality."

To shoppers Laura Lacrosse, 20, and Rachel O'Neal, 26, you have to look no farther than a sweet caramel or a chocolate truffle to see why Stafford received the award.

"I love it, it's the best," LaCrosse said.

"Just coming in here will make you hungry, there is nobody that makes chocolates like Stafford's, period," O'Neal said.

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