

Ooey Gooney lives on

When Porterville candy maker Larry Stafford died in July, daughter Jenny picked up the chocolate torch.



PHOTOS BY KURT HEGRE/THE BEE

Some of the more well-known treats at Stafford's Famous Chocolates in Porterville are those made with molds, like this set of teeth held by Jenny Stafford, daughter of the late Larry Stafford, owner of the store.

By Sanford Nax
The Bee

Jenny Stafford has altered her college plans to run the Porterville candy store her late father built into a local landmark.

Larry Stafford died unexpectedly in July at age 59, leaving Stafford's Famous Chocolates with an uncertain future.

"It was a big shock. I never thought this would happen. He was invincible," Jenny, 19, said about her father, a former insurance salesman who in 1968 told wife Marilyn Stafford that he planned to open the best candy shop in the nation.

"A candy store in Porterville? You are crazy!" was her reply.

But Larry, the son of a professional artist, proved to have a creative bent of his own. Larry and two employees ran the store, although the number of employees would grow to 15 during the busy season. His chocolate molds won industry awards, and the creations were sold in the store and at the wholesale level.

Last March, Larry received an innovative entrepreneur award from the Tulare County Economic Development Corp.

Jenny grew up in the store, helping out during the holiday rushes. She insists that the candy and how it's made will remain the same.

"My dad showed me how to make candy



Some of the many candies made by Stafford's Famous Chocolates include these treats with marshmallow filling.

when I was 7," she said.

Jenny's training is coming in handy as she manages the store, in addition to taking 17 units at Porterville College, where she studies chemistry and math. She plans to transfer to a four-year college, but will wait a year until her brother, Zach, completes his business degree at California State University, Bakersfield.

In the meantime, she's continuing the candy-making tradition that makes

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Jenny Stafford displays some of the varieties of chocolate made at her family's store in Porterville, Stafford's Famous Chocolates. When Jenny's father, Larry Stafford, died unexpectedly in July, Jenny altered her college plans to work in the store so she could carry on her father's work — including his signature Ooey Goopy bars.

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THE FRESNO BEE

Stafford's: Store ships globally

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Stafford's a favorite. She's preparing her father's signature Ooey Goopy bars — a thick layer of marshmallow in between a thin layer of peanut butter and caramel. The bar is dipped in chocolate and covered with nuts.

"He invented that," she said. "It was his specialty, and we just made 100 of them. We're making them every day."

Larry once made a solid chocolate carriage with three horses for a wedding party. Jenny, following her dad's lead, three weeks ago crafted a Harley-Davidson motorcycle that weighed a half-pound, and had an order for a mold shaped like a slot machine, with chocolate coins spread around.

"The community has been very good," she said. "They've been coming in and supporting us since he passed away."

And why not? Stafford's is an icon in the South Valley community. Larry gave tours, hosted Leadership Porterville classes and was recognized by the city in 1994 as an Excellence in Business nominee. He also had a contest

where children invented their own recipes, then were allowed to try them out in the store.

"I've shopped there and almost everyone in Porterville shops there," said Deloris Mahnke, 80, a lifelong resident of the city.

She described Larry Stafford as extremely outgoing and his candy as "better than pretty good. It was superb."

Mahnke said she loves the Ooey Goopy bars. "Yummy" is the only word for it," she said. "It is the blend of flavors, really. When I want to take a little gift to someone out of town, I go to Stafford's."

Linda Wammack can relate. The development associate in the city's community development department often uses Stafford's creations as a marketing tool.

"I've taken them to conferences across the state. It presents Porterville in a great light. Look what we have to offer — a small business that ships worldwide," Wammack said.

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