

**SHEPHERD EXPRESS  
JUNE 6, 2012**

**BEANS AND BARLEY'S LONG-TERM SUCCESS**



In 1973, Beans & Barley (1901 E. North Ave.) began as a tiny health food store with a few barrels of bulk produce. Today it employs a staff of 100, can serve 80 customers in its café and houses a deli, store and gift shop. It has survived a devastating fire and the advent of Whole Foods. It has become an East Side institution. What has been the business model for its long-term success, I wondered? I talked with Lynn Sbonik, one of four owners, to learn more.

**Was there a business plan?**

It was all passion. That was our plan. I became an owner because I thought I would like to do this... None of us had a business or food background. The founder, Mike Stevens, was a progressive "Yippie" kind of guy. My background was the arts. It was the Vietnam War; people didn't trust the government or the World War II foods going into the grocery stores. We got small loans, paid them off and had a good record with the bank. We were fiscally conservative, progressive people. I think that's what people should be.

**Three of the four current owners are women. Has that influenced your business model?**

This business is the way it is because it's owned by three women—and the men involved have been comfortable with that. You can just be yourself, not a woman in a man's world. There's no proving, you just do it—because it's who you are and it made this business paradigm model home. The customers feel it; we feel it.

### **How do you make decisions and operate with four owners?**

Respect is really important. Communication is key—talking through things, having meetings. We make decisions through consensus... The four of us can come up with a more fully faceted solution because we're smart and bring different experiences to the business.

We're kind of an anomaly. It's not about the money. There are years we don't break even and there are years we do—then we paint the outside of the building. We don't just make food and sell funky gifts or coffee; we provide jobs for this community—often entry-level jobs, hard to get... Young people in the kitchen get a feel for what business can be like and see different ways of living. If there's an argument, we tell them, "Listen. Don't talk. Say back what you hear. Then say what you're going to do to fix it."

### **You must be proud.**

I think we're all satisfied with the lives we've made here. Sort of like you make a person when you make a child... The day after 9/11, a woman came in. She said, "I didn't know where to go. This is the only place I could think of that would make me feel good." Can you imagine what a compliment that is?

*photograph courtesy of Shepherd Express*