



SHARING THE LOVE ONE CUP AT A TIME

by Kristin Todd Stires

She had a true passion for coffee. He didn't like the taste. And ironically, it brought them together.

An inconspicuous, brick loft building in the Main Street District of downtown Dallas, Texas, houses burlap sacks of coffee beans and big dreams. This is the headquarters for Well Coffee, a small business created by Brooke Bowen Ramsay, which she now operates with her husband, Jordan Ramsay.

Rewind back to 1999 when Brooke and Jordan had no idea of each other's existence. Although they may have passed each other on campus and in the halls of Hankamer, they did not meet until after their time at Baylor. They both graduated in 2003; Brooke earned a BBA in Human Resource Management and Jordan earned a BBA in Finance.

After graduation, Brooke went to work for Starbucks as a store supervisor and gained business experience by overseeing the opening of two stores in the Dallas area.

"I honestly didn't know what I wanted to do after graduation," she said. "I fell in love with coffee at Common Grounds while at Baylor, so I took my love for coffee and went to work for Starbucks. I learned more about business, coffee and leadership through that experience."

Jordan enlisted in the U.S. Army and served five years in the Infantry, including a yearlong deployment to Iraq. After his military service, he became involved with real estate and eventually moved to Dallas where he enrolled in Southern Methodist University's MBA program.

Brooke's love of coffee became her central focus as she began to recognize her hibernating entrepreneurial spirit.

"If you're an entrepreneur by nature, it's like a blessing and curse," she said. "You can't get it out of your system until you explore your ideas. I feel like I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit, but I just didn't know myself well enough to acknowledge it in college."

Brooke poured herself into independent research about coffee and its transformation from a raw commodity into a consumable product. After learning statistics about coffee producers and fair trade, Brooke took an anthropological approach and traveled to Rwanda in 2008 with a nonprofit organization called ALARM to experience coffee farming firsthand.

"In my mind, I couldn't shake the disparity between producers and consumers, and I wanted to see how the farmers lived and the difference fair trade practices make," she said. "ALARM was part of the rehabilitation of a coffee plantation in northern Rwanda that had been devastated during the genocide. We met with local farmers and talked with exporters. It was eye opening to see the economic effect the plantation had on the entire village. It brought the story of coffee and all the people that play a role in the process to life."



Upon returning to the U.S., Brooke caught a flight to Honduras a week later to meet missionaries who were starting a coffee ministry with local farmers, paying fair wages and empowering them to break the cycle of poverty. The trips to Rwanda and Honduras proved visionary.

"The trips solidified in my heart the desire to be a part of the economic development in the regions that I would buy coffee beans from," she said.

"I came back, didn't know where to start and had no money to do it. But God is faithful, and when His hand is in something, things come together in ways we can't explain. He gave me the courage to step out in faith and start my company."

Well Coffee was established at the end of 2009 and began supplying retailers in January of 2010. The company functions as a coffee roaster, buying coffee beans from boutique importers who work with the farmers. These importers either have a nonprofit arm within their trading company that they use to invest back into the community through a direct trade model, or they partner with a nonprofit organization. Well Coffee roasts the beans and distributes the coffee to various retailers, including Dallas-area restaurants, a hotel, a coffee shop and Bolsa Mercado in Oak Cliff, as well as individual clients. Common Grounds actually served as the company's first account. As Well Coffee established its roots and gained momentum, Brooke and Jordan finally crossed paths.

"Although we attended different churches, we met at a Bible study. I phone stalked her for a couple of weeks, and then we finally went on a date," Jordan laughed. "I actually didn't like coffee at the time, but I knew that she was a coffee roaster so I asked her on a date to get coffee."

"Our first date actually ended up being at Well Coffee," Brooke said. "I can be skeptical, and I wasn't quite sure about him at first so I invited him to the roastery instead. He came over while I roasted coffee for some clients, and we ended up talking for hours. He enjoys a good cup of coffee now!"

The couple married in October 2011, and of course, incorporated coffee into the wedding by providing each guest with a bag of Well Coffee, which featured Jordan's Scottish family crest on the front and the couple's story on the back. They now operate Well Coffee together.

"One of the first conversations that Brooke and I had was about our vision for our lives and what we felt God was calling us to do," Jordan said. "Before Brooke even told me about her company, I told her I felt a strong calling to provide for people in underdeveloped economies. Well Coffee has been such a blessing, as it's become a way for us to help provide for people on a small economic level in countries like Rwanda so they can create a better quality of life."

The couple's passion for helping others is expressed in the company name and motto.

"The motto for Well Coffee is 'Live well. Love well. Drink well.,'" Brooke said. 'Well' is part of our name and our tagline because it refers to water as a life source and reminds us of those living in regions where they get their water from wells. Many of those villages served by water wells are the same villages of our coffee farmers. Well also refers to Jesus Christ, since He is our source of life, and we want every aspect of our business to reflect that."

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Well Coffee's vision is two-fold: first, catering to customers on a local and national level, and secondly, reaching others on a global scale. Brooke and Jordan hold "BYOM" (Bring Your Own Mug) events at Well Coffee, which benefit different nonprofits with a mission to help others on a local and global level.

"At BYOM events, we are able to highlight a different nonprofit each time, and part of the sale of coffee at the events serves as a donation to the nonprofit," Brooke said. "We've benefitted a human trafficking organization, a clean water organization and several other nonprofits that work to invest in people locally and globally."

Well Coffee also offers "Tours and Tastings" as a way for people to engage in the process of coffee production and learn about the social impacts of coffee. You could call it customer service with a social conscience.

"We invite customers to the roastery and walk them through the process of the bean," Brooke said. "We talk about where coffee comes from and how it gets to the burlap sacks we store at the roastery. We roast a batch of coffee together and taste it. It's a fun way for us to interact with clients and get to know people in the community."

Brooke describes coffee roasters as the "mad scientists of the industry" since they handle the manipulation of the raw product, and customers that come to BYOM events and Tours and Tastings get a behind-the-scenes look at Well Coffee's "lab."

"A coffee roaster is an interesting piece of machinery," Brooke said. "It's like the Wizard of Oz; people come by and want to see the mysterious roaster. No one has seen one or has an idea of what it looks like until the curtain is drawn."

Well Coffee welcomes customers to its roastery; however, the couple also offers free "to your door" delivery for customers who live near the roastery and within the 75214 Dallas area zip code.

"We want to put an emphasis on our individual client base because we can engage in direct dialogue with our customers and share the bigger story of coffee," Jordan said. "The end goal is connectivity between the source and the mouths that drink it. We want to increase awareness through customer engagement."

Well Coffee also strives to keep a simple business model and relate to any customer, even those who may have minimal knowledge of coffee and its assortment of roasts and blends. Brooke and Jordan stay away from what Brooke refers to as "coffee nerdery" when interacting with customers. Coffee nerdery encompasses all the intricacies that come along with coffee roasting, blending and tasting, which includes evaluating its aroma, acidity, body, flavor and finish—an in-depth understanding of coffee akin to a sommelier's level of understanding wine.

"The coffee culture can be exclusive," Brooke said. "When I created Well Coffee, I really wanted to be inclusive and not overwhelm people with coffee nerdery. Our customers know they like coffee roasted lighter or darker, and that's a great starting place. The starting place of our coffee is a medium blend and a dark blend. It's about meeting our customers where they're at. If you keep it simple and let the coffee speak for itself, people will come back."

You establish that loyalty first and then maybe you can talk about coffee nerdery."

As they grow the company, Brooke and Jordan are refining their online customer service efforts as well.

"We are working on our website and making it more user-friendly," Jordan said. "We want to make it easier for customers to be a part of Well Coffee. They can buy coffee online and specify how or when they want the coffee delivered."

In the future, the couple also hopes to travel to more of the places where they buy coffee beans—Brazil, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Rwanda, Sumatra (Indonesia)—on a frequent basis.

"We love involving our customers in the process of coffee," Brooke said. "By going to these places we can share about the social impacts of coffee more effectively with others. I would like Well Coffee to be a legacy we leave for our children and make it into a family owned and operated business one day."

While the American population may not think twice as they consume the world's second largest traded commodity by drinking 400 million cups of coffee each day,

Brooke and Jordan hope to make a lasting impact one cup at a time.

"Our relationship has revolved around coffee," Brooke said. "Coffee really connects people. It brought us together, and we've learned so much about each other through working as a team and running Well Coffee. Coffee is something people consume every day, but it directly affects lives of people around the world. We want our customers to understand the bigger story behind coffee and share in that experience with them."



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