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SKED Helps Smith Keep Family Legacy Strong

SOMERSET, KY – You could say Amanda Finley Smith has skated her way through life. You could say that, but it wouldn't be further from the truth. The small business owner and working mom has faced several challenges in her young life, but through them all, she's managed to land on her feet and on the path she now believes is her own. She's providing safe, family entertainment in the community she calls home, just as her family before her has for decades.



AMANDA FINLEY SMITH

The Somerset Sk8ter's Paradise, LLC, owner is a third-generation roller-skating rink owner. She grew up in the family entertainment business, the daughter of two entrepreneurs: Mike and Christina Finley, and the granddaughter of one of Laurel County's most prolific business owners: the late Lester Finley. Between her parents and grandfather, her family has owned 17 successful businesses. Some include: Finley's Fun Center and Finley's Drive-in, in London, The Job Shop, Med Plus Staffing and more.

But Smith didn't feel the entrepreneurial call on her life early on. She wanted to teach school and influence young lives. So, she enrolled in the education program at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Ky. after high school. "My dad always said: Do what you want to do, and my goal was to be a teacher. I wanted to work with children, and I didn't feel like it was my calling to do this (working in the family business)," she said.

She was nearly finished with the program when she realized teaching wasn't for her after all. It was around that same time when she faced her biggest challenge at the time.

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Her father was one of 49 people who lost their lives when Comair Flight 5191 crashed on the Bluegrass Airport runway on Aug. 27, 2006. He was on his way to a national roller-skating convention in Nevada. The Finley family lost their father and husband, and the family entertainment community lost a visionary entrepreneur.

It wasn't until her father's death that Smith realized exactly how big an impact her father and his businesses had on people in the community. It was a life-altering event for her in more ways than one. Sudden death can knock people down and they never get up. Smith's love for her father and his business helped her get back on her feet. His words of encouragement helped her stand.

"Dad would say: 'if it's something you love and your heart is really in it, then get up and do it'," she explained. "He loved what he did so it was never work to him. It was like a big playground."

Smith grew up in the roller skating business as a self-proclaimed "rink rat," but she admits she didn't always love it. She started working at the family owned rink (Finley's Fun Center) in London at the age of 11. She did so to earn a pair of expensive roller skates she wanted to buy but had to earn. She worked there after school and on weekends until she went away to college. But it was a job, she said, only a job.

When her father built the Finley's Fun Center Somerset location 21 years ago, she and her brother called it his "third kid." "This was his dream rink," she said. "He built it from the ground up and had his hands in every area of the design. He loved this place."

After his death, other owners leased the rink, but it never quite lived up to her father's dream for the business. It was his loss that inspired her to take over the Somerset location to help keep his legacy alive. She assumed ownership six years ago.

Smith's goal has been to build on her father's legacy and take it a step further. When she took over the business in 2012, it had been a losing venture for the previous two years. Since taking over the business, she's made multiple renovations including installing new carpeting, a new skate floor, new laser tag equipment and new pizza ovens.

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But small business ownership is challenging for the most ardent of entrepreneurs. It takes more than a desire to do it; it takes dedication, education and capital to keep it running smoothly.

When Smith took over the business, it had no money, needed a lot of work and new branding to bring it back to life. She admits it was a challenge taking her father's dream and trying to rebuild it with little to no financing. It was like trying to skate without wheels, she said. She was stuck.

She found that financing and a lot more at Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation (SKED). The 32-year-old economic development organization was in her backyard, literally. Her next-door neighbor, Amanda Kelly, works for SKED as its small business training director and told her how part of the nonprofit lender's mission includes: small business development, financing and technical assistance. Smith needed all three.

After replacing the rink's 12,000 SF skate floor in 2015, the Laurel County native was strapped for cash and applied for a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) Loan through SKED, and in no time she was back on her feet.

In 2016, she came back to SKED when she needed to replace the aging carpeting and purchase the most up-to-date the Laser Tag equipment. Incrementally, she was rebuilding the family business.

When the pizza ovens stopped working in 2017, she applied for one of SKED's U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Micro Loans and was back to feeding her hungry skaters in only a few weeks.

With all of the key components in place, she began developing programs specific to the needs of families in Pulaski County such as: Read N Roll, Skate to the Light, Skate a Million Miles and more. She continues to look for ways to help her "Skate Families" have a safe place to take their children and grandchildren.

"Giving this community's children a safe place to play and skate is my dream," Smith said. "And I'm living that dream today. My customers are more of a family," she said. "We take care of each other. I'm here for them to give their children a safe place to play and learn, and

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they encourage me to keep doing what I'm doing. I see the smiles on their faces and the joy this place brings them.”

Smith lives in Somerset with her husband Zachary and their 18-month-old daughter Isabella.

She wants her daughter to carry on the family legacy, but knows firsthand the challenges of a woman-owned business take on a life of their own. “It’s easy to get taken advantage of by those who think you don’t know what you’re doing,” Smith said. “It’s easy to find yourself not being taken seriously.”

Even with the encouragement of her experienced, entrepreneurial mother and the National Roller Skating Association, Smith faced opposition from many sides. She says the guidance and support from SKED was often the best help of all.

“With Bella by my side, I hope to break all the barriers that women business owners face today,” Smith said. “Hopefully by the time she’s in my shoes, she won’t have to experience the struggle I have.”

And through it all, Smith says she believes she’s spoken into the lives of more children, as the owner of Sk8ter’s Paradise, than she ever could have as a teacher. “I know this is where I belong,” she said. “Dad would be proud.”

If you know a small business owner in need of working capital or funds to purchase equipment, contact SKED at (606) 677-6100 or email at akelly@centertech.com.

SKED is a nonprofit economic development organization and has been designated a CDC by the U.S. Small Business Administration. The organization was formed 32 years ago by Fifth District Congressman Hal Rogers to create jobs in Southeast Kentucky.

Its corporate office is based in Somerset and serves a 45-county service region. A staff of ten professionals works with business owners, small and large, to identify financing solutions to fund their location, expansion and working capital needs, and provide them the technical assistance and training they need to succeed.

For more information about SKED, visit our website: www.southeastkentucky.com.