

Testimony of
Joe Steffy, Owner of Poppin Joe's™ Gourmet Kettle Korn
Help Wanted: Small Business Providing Opportunities for All
Before the Small Business Committee
United States House of Representatives
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My Name is Joe Steffy, I am 30 years old and I own Poppin Joe's Kettle Korn. I was born with Down Syndrome and later diagnosed with Autism. When I was in school, my professional reports said I had an IQ of 32 with profound intellectual disabilities. These reports said that my receptive and expressive language was at a 3 year old level, and that I had minimal basic academic skills.

As I grew, my parents saw that I liked to do things independently, I loved being active with other people and spending time with family and friends. They recognized that I had a very good memory for detail, and could follow through with activities that are part of a regular routine. I was blessed with many community opportunities and became a very strong swimmer. This led to being able to work at the community pool. I enjoyed riding horseback at a local stable and began to volunteer there to work with the horses. Soon I worked in exchange for riding.

In high school, my IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team began to plan for my transition into adulthood. The team had very low expectations. The worst disability there is that of low expectations. They said I would never hold a job, that I had no attention span, could not focus, would need to live in a group home and go to a sheltered workshop. My parents disagreed. They knew I was capable of working and that I learned by watching. They also knew I would do exactly what I saw done, so teaching me the right way to do things would be important. I am happiest when I am busy and my parents knew this. I would work, they said.

While on a trip, my Dad saw a man popping Kettle korn that caught his attention. He asked many questions about the process of the man, and learned that Kettle Korn is an old German way of popping popcorn with sugar. When you add the sugar and secret ingredients to the popcorn and vegetable oil in the hot kettle, the sugar breaks down into a liquid. As the popcorn pops it comes up through the sugar and gives the kernels a sugar coating. While popping, the kettle is 500 degrees so it is important that it is constantly stirred. As you stir the popped kernels, it comingles. Once it is all popped, it is dumped out onto the screening table where it cools.

My Dad came away excited about the possibilities to use this to build on my strengths. This was a way for me to prove that I could work. We began my work trial in October of 2000. The goal was to see if I could work. We popped on weekends at local grocery stores and I showed Dad I could stay on task for up to 6 hours. In the work trial, Dad saw that I could learn the repetition of the production process. I could pop, and I could bag, both key parts of popping Kettle Korn.

My parents decided this looked like very promising work for me. They attended a **Partners in Policymaking class** in Kansas that David Hammis presented at. They learned that I and others with

significant disabilities could OWN their own business. The key to making Poppin Joe's Kettle Korn come true was having a business plan, doing the work trial to prove I could work. **First Steps** helped Mom set up the business plan, and the **Kansas Department for Developmental Disabilities** provided me with a new business startup grant to purchase new equipment. My start up team included **Social Security**, which offers a program called PASS (The plan for achieving self-support) which supported my business goals and provided cash set aside for my monthly cash flow. My parents also worked with **Vocational Rehab** to purchase a computer and laser printer for my business. They submitted my business plan to open Poppin Joes Kettle Korn to each of these team members. My Team was then able to provide me the start-up supports I needed to become the sole proprietor of Poppin Joe's Kettle Korn in April of 2005.

I offer five products in my business. Cinnamon Kettle Korn, Sweet and Cheesy, Old Fashioned Kettle Korn, White Cheddar popcorn, and Golden Karmel Korn. I sell 65% at Festivals like the County Fair, Car shows, and various festivals around Kansas City. 25% of my business is through Retail outlets, where I supply weekly to specialty stores, gas stations, medical centers, and Farmer's Markets. The final 10 % is done for special events like weddings, graduations, employee events, and internet sales.

My daily business tasks include deliveries, banking, paying my bills, and sending out invoices, as well as popping kettle korn to keep up with the demand. My gross sales started out at \$15,000 in 2005. They doubled in 2006 and have now tripled. Sales in 2016 were just over \$67,000. I have 7 seasonally employees. I even pay taxes. I am a success because of teamwork and the commitment my parents have made to me.

Popping Joe's Kettle Korn began with the Mission of: 1) Honoring God in all I do, 2) To be a blessing to other people, 3) To pursue excellence, 4) To grow profitability. I am a member in the community that I work in, which gives me a place to belong. I am a contributing citizen and am able to do fundraisers for local churches, schools, businesses and communities events, as well as for many non-profit organizations. I shipped kettle korn to the troops in Afghanistan. My community values me.

In 2008, Poppin Joes helped me move into my own home. I love my freedom – it gives me a great life! I go to work during the day, and hang out and do fun activities at night, just like most business owners. I have many activities I enjoy, like shooting hoops, horseback riding, swimming, traveling, skiing, going to amusement parks, water surfing, sky diving, lifting weights, scuba diving, spending time with my family and friends. My business has also enabled me to have many adventures, going places and meeting people I would not otherwise get to meet. I have been invited to travel and share my story with groups across the country. This has brought me many new friends, and expanded my business even further.

My business works for me. It creates new opportunities for me to grow as a person, and to be an engaged, valued member of my community. With the right support system, being a self-supporting entrepreneur can be, and is, a reality for me. Thank you for inviting me.

I have been blessed by incredible parents who have advocated for me from my birth. They saw my potential, they knew that I could succeed. They have helped me make my business a reality, and a continued success.

I love being 'Poppin Joe'. It is an honor to be here. Thank you.

*Article is from Joe's Power point presentation he uses with his augmentative device to tell his story.

Joe Steffy is 30 years old and lives in his own apartment in Louisburg, Kansas and is the owner of Popping Joe's Kettle Korn. www.poppinjoes.com