

Hugh Umbel

Life-Long Entrepreneur

Deep Creek Lake, Maryland



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Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Hugh Umbel is a well known Garrett County entrepreneur who has achieved success and notoriety throughout the region. Not one to remain idle, Hugh may often be found attending to one of his enterprises anytime between the hours of early morning and late evening. Those residents who know Hugh would agree that he works to live and lives to work—the two activities are inseparable. To those unacquainted with him, it may be of interest to learn that his entrepreneurial spirit and strong work ethic were developed as a youngster growing up in Garrett County, Maryland, a place that he is proud to call home.

Summertime during the 1950s was not viewed as a reason to kick back and relax at the Umbel household. To the contrary, the aspiring entrepreneur took advantage of work opportunities provided by local farmers who required ten hour work days. As Umbel recalled, “In addition to working for farmers, I also sold newspapers, pens, and plant seeds for four years. The newspapers were ten cents, and I always

ordered extra copies to sell at Friendsville bars. I would sell the paper to people who were drinking and they would give me twenty-five cents to one dollar. One time I received a two dollar bill! Sometimes they would throw the paper in a corner, and I would pick it up and resell it.”

A relative’s wholesale meat processing plant in Frostburg also provided employment during the fifth grade and two summers. In addition to learning the value of hard work, the part time jobs proved to be valuable experiences for later career choices.

Six months following graduation from Northern High School, Hugh decided to move toward the metropolitan area surrounding the District of Columbia. Resources for the 1961 journey included a two hundred dollar loan from neighboring farmers, Mr. and Mrs. Friend, and departing advice from his father. “My father told me that if I was going to get ahead in life, I would have to work for it,” recalled Hugh. His father’s advice proved to be prophetic



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and half the loan was paid in two months. “Mrs. Friend told me not to worry about the other one hundred dollars because it was a gift for helping out on the farm.”

Employment in the metropolitan area was realized during a visit to his aunt’s house in Bethesda, Maryland, a trip that coincided with a major snow storm. The need for bread and milk caused Hugh to walk the one mile distance to a Grand Union supermarket where he encountered the store manager. “I told him that I was looking for work,” explained Hugh. “He would have hired me on the spot, but I first had to formally apply at the employment office in Washington, DC. After completing the application, I

Above: Market Square in McHenry, MD (Deep Creek Lake) with Foodland Fresh opening in 1997, was built on the concept of a small town market square. The supermarket is now called SHOP ‘n SAVE, an affiliate of Super Value. A major expansion came about with Perkins Restaurant, 2003 (right) and Bear Creek Traders opening in 2004.





In the 1950s as a sixth grader, Hugh was already a young entrepreneur purchasing his own clothes. The shirt in this photo was the first shirt he bought.



This 1961 Chevrolet Belair convertible was the first car Hugh purchased with his savings.



Relaxing by fishing on Deep Creek Lake in the 1970s, this is first fish Hugh landed.

became part of the night shift stock crew at the Hyattsville store.” It was a good fit for the company and Hugh, because his earlier farming and meat processing experiences provided unique insights into the supermarket business.

Hugh quickly impressed the Grand Union management team who promoted him to crew manager within six months. His career at Grand Union continued to accelerate through a series of promotions that eventually earned him the titles of general manager and district sales supervisor. In order to enhance his retailing skills, Hugh enrolled at American University where he studied economics, marketing, and supermarket management. His father’s advice continued to resonate as he also worked evenings as assistant manager at the National Bank of Washington, DC, where he reconciled branch office accounts, and from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm on weekends at Federal Supermarkets.

It was at Grand Union that Hugh learned the value of customer service and creative marketing. When assuming the responsibilities of managing an underperforming store, Hugh’s first order of business was to clean the facilities, and the second to develop creative marketing plans.

Grand Union followed the pattern of most large retailers in prescribing the placement of goods on shelves, commonly called “plan-o-grams” in the industry. The one-size-fits-all plans did not take into consideration customer demographics.

Hugh, however, recognized the changing demographics of his customer base in Langley Park, Maryland. “I introduced a line of ethnic foods where the bread section was located. The new line had a better mark up than bread and we had customers for the Goya products. Of course, the new products were not authorized by Grand Union. When the district manager visited my store, he looked at the display and said, “Good idea!” Grand Union followed Hugh’s lead in recognizing the value of offering ethnic foods and quickly initiated a program in all stores.

Another creative idea occurred when Hugh considered a large vacant space near the front of his store. In the past it had likely served a useful purpose but was currently providing no return. A decision was made to order a trailer truck load of Green Giant vegetables, discount the retail price, and display them in the formerly empty space. To promote the products, a large Jolly Green Giant figure was acquired and assembled in front of the canned vegetables. “It was a big hit! We had teachers and students coming in to take pictures with the Jolly Green Giant. We not only sold the first truck load, but ordered additional ones,” added Hugh. The creative marketing plan was cause for Hugh to become a marketing instructor to Grand Union store managers.

After ten years with Grand Union, a chance look at a newspaper advertisement captured Hugh’s attention. The



While a manager at Grand Union supermarket, Hugh learned the value of customer service and creative marketing displaying items specific to store demographics.



classified ad was seeking an entrepreneur who wanted to own his own business, something he had not attempted. Hugh learned the opportunity involved an Exxon dealership in College Park, Maryland. An initial look at the site was not encouraging, and he developed serious reservations about giving up a good paying job for a gas station with obvious needs. Meetings with a persistent Exxon representative, followed by a conversation with the property owner, eventually convinced him the business had potential for success.

“I finally asked the owner how much he wanted for the business, and he responded with a low price, so I took it. His price included tire machines, tools, batteries, engine scopes, and whatever else was on site. I gave notice to Grand Union and started with Exxon. I also called my brother, who was working part time at a station in Bethesda, and offered him the job of managing,” recalled Hugh.

The first month of operation in 1971 proved to be profitable, and there was no looking back. Hugh utilized his marketing skills to display and promote quality products and services; within a short period of time the business earned the distinction of being the number one Allied parts purchaser from the Exxon Marketing Division. A major reason for achieving success was changing the common perception of gas stations being dirty places where grimy hands would leave marks on customers’ vehicles. “We stressed that employees should dress properly and wash their hands before dealing with customers,” explained Hugh.

In 1980, another marketing innovation occurred after Hugh elected to convert his station to a self-service facility. “We were located near the University of Maryland, and I could see the self-service trend developing,” Hugh stated. Exxon chose to feature Hugh on a nationally televised



commercial promoting the benefits of self-service. “I received a tremendous advertising boost from the commercial. People stopped by from all over the country to have me autograph their road maps. And we were over booked for service repairs.” Success at the Exxon location resulted in numerous company awards over the years, and facilitated the opening of a second Exxon service center and auto parts store.

While the service centers were successful, the Garrett County native kept thinking of Western Maryland. The thoughts grew more frequent after forming Legacy Home Corp. for the purpose of building houses in Prince Georges, Montgomery, and Garrett Counties. A get away house at Deep Creek Lake brought him closer to his roots, but only on a part time basis.

Hugh used his creative marketing skills when promoting parts and services at Exxon during the 1970s. Within a short time, the business earned many number one awards.

Top right: In the mid 1980s in Houston, TX, Hugh received the “Top Dealer” award for Exxon USA.

Above: In 1987 Hugh received the Exxon “Commitment to Excellence” award; one of several over the years.

Top left: Hugh filmed a nationally televised commercial for Exxon, promoting the benefits of self-service in the 1980s.





Top: Hugh receiving "Retailer of the Year" award (2008) from Super Value Corporation for Foodland Fresh.

Above: Perkins Restaurant "Customer Service" award (2006).

Right: The opening of Bear Creek Traders retail store in Market Square, 2004.

Growing increasingly tired of the fast paced metropolitan area, a decision was made to return home on a permanent basis. Hugh reflected, "I returned to Garrett County for three reasons. First, I loved the area. Secondly, I was tired of the city tread mill, and lastly, I saw the need for retailing businesses in Garrett County."

To follow through on the decision Hugh purchased approximately eighteen acres of land at the current location of Market Square in McHenry. Two marketing studies provided an estimate of dollar revenue at the site, while also specifically recommending the construction of a supermarket. The last recommendation was met with skepticism by many. Hugh recalled, "People got a good laugh out of the supermarket idea and predicted it would fail." Not to be deterred by skeptics, Hugh met with representatives from Foodland markets and reached an agreement. "I decided to go with Foodland but wanted to develop it my own way. That is how the name 'Foodland Fresh' came about."

With an agreement in hand, construction began at the Market Square site, eventually culminating in the opening of the supermarket in 1997. Building on the concept of a small town market square, Hugh worked closely with a



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local architect Philip Silkey to incorporate features from the Loch Lynn train station, a barn in Accident, and other local landmarks, thereby presenting an appropriate setting for additional stores. A major expansion occurred in 2004, coinciding with the opening of Bear Creek Traders. Today, the shopping center also includes Perkins (2003), Huey’s Ice Cream, Legacy Home Corp, and Umbel Good-fellow, LLC. The supermarket is now called SHOP ’n SAVE Fresh, an affiliate of Super Value. The purchase of nearby McHenry Plaza, in 2003, location of McHenry Beverage Shoppe, added to Umbel’s retail locations at Deep Creek Lake.



Success has been shared with the Garrett County community. Major donations were made on behalf of the Deep Creek Volunteer Fire Company and Garrett County Memorial Hospital in Oakland. Additional community causes are supported annually, such as the annual fireworks display and the Deep Creek Lake Arts & Wine Festival. The employment of several hundred residents at Umbel Enterprises also supports the economic base of Garrett County.



Reflecting on his return from the metropolitan area, Hugh remains grateful and optimistic.

“I may have been further ahead monetarily in the metropolitan area, but money wasn’t always my primary goal. Instead, my goal was to reside in a safe environment and develop services. I never regretted returning to Garrett County. I love living here.”

Why not retire? “I am still having fun because my job is fun. When work is no longer fun, then it is time to quit,” states Hugh.



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The reasons for Hugh’s business success and fun are not difficult to find because they are deeply rooted in his Garrett County upbringing. Hugh summarizes the success by stating, “I am a hometown individual who worked hard and learned the basics of business from my father, and then followed my instincts.”

Top: Hugh’s brothers and sister (from left): Dale, Ohlen, Jr., Cecil, Betty and Hugh.
Middle: Hugh with his children (from left): Jonathan, Sherry, Hugh, and Jeffrey.
Bottom left: One of many Legacy Home Corp. homes built at Deep Creek Lake.
Bottom right: Hugh’s wife, Darlene.