

## BUSINESS LEADER PROFILE

# Dave Ryan

*Mel-O-Cream, director of human resources and regulatory compliance*

By SANDY MCCOLLUM  
Staff writer

Two and a half dozen years ago, David Ryan heard about a job opening at Mel-O-Cream donuts. It was 1977, and the company was looking for a truck driver. I can do that, Dave thought, so he walked in and applied.

"One of my references was Jim Atkinson," Ryan says. Atkinson had been active in Rotary Club for years, so had Kelly Grant Jr., Mel-O-Cream's president. When Grant called Atkinson to see what he had to say about Ryan, Atkinson was enthusiastic, giving Ryan a glowing recommendation, and Ryan got the job. Although his title has changed through the years, Ryan will still drive a truck when needed. Last month a customer in Minneapolis needed something. Ryan took care of the problems by taking a shipment to the customer. He does whatever it takes to get the job done. It's part of working in a company with fewer than 100 employees.

"We don't dwell too much on titles," Ryan says.

There have been as many as 115 employees, and as few as 60. Right now the company employs about 70 people.

Ryan has been with the company all these 30 years, serving as truck driver, warehouse foreman and warehouse manager. Today, he is the director of human resources and regulatory compliance.

He has a plaque on his desk: "We are continually faced by great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems. Lee Iacocca." It's a good description of the company's continuing growth through moves, expansion, a strike and a tornado. Ryan has been there for much of it.

From 1977 to 1991, he drove a truck and worked in the warehouse. The com-



pany was still on North Street at the time. In 1991, he was running the warehouse; he did that for about a year and then moved into hiring, benefits and administration. It wasn't a big leap. At the warehouse, he'd been doing hiring and many of the administrative duties that go with it. The administration part was taking time and effort.

"I had a man I was grooming to take over running the warehouse," Ryan says of his move into full-time administration. "I was an early-on practitioner of finding talent."

There have been several big events during Ryan's time at

Mel-O-Cream.

In 1978-1979, the company installed a frozen dough line in a 5,500 square-foot addition to the North Street location. By 1987-1988, it was time to expand again. A new storage freezer was added in 1987, a second frozen dough line was added in 1988.

In 1993-1995, the company had outgrown the North Street location again, and to keep up with competition, the company planned to produce pre-fried donuts. There was a catch. The company needed to expand its facilities again but the city of Springfield's extension of Stanford and Wabash avenues threatened to chop up the Mel-O-Cream property at 800 W. North St. and ruin its plans to grow and build a new dough factory.

If the company couldn't expand on North Street, Grant hoped to at least keep the company in Springfield.

"We wanted to be in a place

adjacent to the city," Ryan says. "Someplace in or around city. We needed city utilities, and we wanted to be someplace where we wouldn't be bad neighbors. Someplace where when the late shift came in and there were car doors slamming at midnight, it wouldn't bother anyone."

Then there was also the issue of the odor. It seems impossible that the sweet scent of fresh Mel-O-Cream donuts wafting through the air would offend anyone, but the company didn't want to take any chances.

As negotiations dragged on, Grant seriously considered moving the operation to somewhere other than Springfield. Former Springfield Mayor Karen Hasara stressed the need to keep industrial jobs in Springfield and attract new business.

"Mayor Hasara had numerous conversations with Kelly and said she would do whatever she could to help," Ryan says. Hasara was true to her word. The city stepped in and used its bonding authority to make \$5 million in bonds available to Mel-O-Cream to build a new plant. Mel-O-Cream found a 58-acre tract of land southwest of Springfield. The land was close to two interstates, I-55 and I-72. The city council approved the agreement. Mel-O-Cream assumed all risk for the bonds, and no city money was involved.

"We moved here September 1997," Ryan recalls. "There was nothing else out here. The last stop light was at Lowe's."

"We've been here almost 10 years. When we moved here, we were pioneers. You know what they say about pioneers? The pioneers are the ones with the arrows in their backs."

The weekend before the new facility opened, Ryan used his trucking license again.

"I hauled away some of the materials

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by the truckload over the weekend. It was very exciting. We had a new building, a new process, it was scary."

Then there was the 11-week labor strike in 2002. It was a painful time for everyone.

"It was challenging," Ryan says. "In retrospect I think it was something that neither the company nor the union wanted and probably, like many labor disputes, it was a product of ineffective communication."

"I talked with the president of the union candidly, a while ago. He admitted that he probably made some errors in judgment, and so did we," Ryan says.

Looking back at what happened, Ryan believes there were several factors that led to the strike. For years, the union had been represented by Local 316 out of Decatur. On Aug. 1, 2001, the union was merged into the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 1. That meant the company, which had a long history with Local 316, was now negotiating with people it didn't know and who didn't know it.

At the same time, the company brought in a labor attorney to negotiate on its behalf.

"That was probably a problem on our side and on the union's side," Ryan says.

It was another new part in the labor negotiations that may have led union negotiators to think the company was going to play hardball, leading to a whole new level of mistrust.

Ryan also believes most workers wanted to continue with long-term employment with the company, but a few were more interested in stirring unrest.

There were 52 workers who went out on strike. As the strike continued, the company hired 35 replacement workers. When the strike was over, 24 employees wanted to return.

Today, there is a much better relationship between the company and the union.

"Our last contract, which began May 1, 2005, was the first contract that was negotiated and signed off on before the other expired since the 1960s. You could say we kissed and made up," Ryan says.

One of the hard times endured by the company had nothing to do with politics, competition or labor. The company is located at Wabash Avenue and I-72, right in the path of the March 12, 2006 tornado. The company lost an estimated \$250,000 worth of frozen dough and pre-fried products when the tornado tore off the southwest corner of the building and damaged a portion of a freezer.

Ryan takes his profession as human resources and compliance director seriously. He studied for



three months and passed the grueling 250-question, three and a half hour senior professional human resources exam. He's a member of the Society for Human Resource Management and has been treasurer of the local SHRM chapter for two years.

He won a Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points award in a program started by NASA in 1968 to ensure food safety.

"It's not a food quality program; it's a safety program in food and pharmaceuticals," he explains.

Ryan is a man who sticks with what he likes. In addition to his 30 years at Mel-O-Cream, he's been involved in area hockey at virtually every level.

He's been involved with youth hockey since 1991. His two sons played competition travel hockey. Ryan was treasurer of Springfield Youth Hockey from 1995-1997. In 2001, he helped Gary Wells found Lincoln Land High School Hockey League. He is the treasurer there and still on the board. He referees youth, high school and men's hockey leagues.

And, Ryan gives full credit to those who helped him along the way.

"All of my opportunities came from Kelly Grant Jr. He's been a mentor, landlord, surrogate father, fraternity brother to my son, my how-to guy, Christmas party host and citrus czar," Ryan says. He had to explain the "citrus czar" reference: "Every year the Rotary citrus gets delivered and sorted out of here about the first of December."

While Ryan credits Grant. Both men acknowledge the huge contribution Ryan's wife, the former Sheila Marrin, has made.

"Remember, behind every good man stands an even better woman," Ryan says.

As a man who knows what he likes, Ryan and his wife just celebrated 28 years of marriage.

Ryan says he's easy to find.

"I'm at home, the office, the ice rink or traveling somewhere in between."

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