



IN THIS ISSUE

Out To Eat

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- » **Forman Mills** Jewish owner believes in giving back through his chain of deep-discount stores. **See page 8.**
- » **Opening Day** A look back in Tigers' history and a guide to healthy eating at the stadium. **See page 18.**
- » **Disappointment With U-M Fraternity** Trashing a resort — and SAM's heritage. **See page 52.**



Opening Day, 1994, Tiger Stadium

metro » cover story



Happy
Passover
5775!

Cover Illustration by Roni Pinto



» Passover 5775

- Sephardic Traditions, page 30
- Women's Seder, page 32
- Lively Seders, page 38
- Weeknight Recipes, page 64

Old-School Selling

Rick Forman's newest superstores in Southfield, Pontiac rooted in Jewish ideals.

Allan Nahajewski
Contributing Writer

Faith. Perseverance. Mitzvah. Upon these fundamentals, Rick Forman has built an empire. As a teen, he sold T-shirts at a flea market. Today, the 54-year-old Jersey native is founder/CEO of Forman Mills, a chain of 35 deep-discount clothing and home-furnishing stores in eight states.

The company's newest and largest store opened March 27 in Pontiac at the Oakland Pointe Shopping Center in the 88,000-square-foot space formerly occupied by Mervyn's at 250 N. Telegraph Road. It's the sixth Forman Mills in Michigan.

In November, the retailer opened a 55,000-square-foot store at 29708 Southfield Road, site of the former Marshall's store in the Southfield Plaza. Together, the two stores have added more than 400 jobs to the area.

"I love Michigan. There's something about it I can't explain," Forman says. "When I'm here, I feel like I'm in the 1960s or '70s in a good way. The people are down to earth, and there's so much opportunity."



Rick Forman

Born To Sell

Forman doesn't remember when he wasn't selling. He remembers charging childhood friends to crawl through a tunnel into the family laundry room where he would tell them a horror story. He says he feels an

affinity to the pushcart fruit merchants of the 1920s. "I almost feel like I'm reincarnated," he says.

As a 16-year-old, he asked his father for a loan so he and a friend could try flea market sales. "My dad wasn't doing that well at the time. He was into manufacturing, and the imports killed his business," he recalls. "One day, I asked for money and said we were going to buy some toy water guns and some things to sell. He just threw \$80 in the air and said, take it. I picked it all up. That was our capital. We didn't know what we were doing. We just kept selling."

Faith

Forman briefly attended Rutgers University but dropped out. "I couldn't focus," he says. "I would be sitting there



thinking about how many T-shirts I needed for the flea market."

Ten years ago, after Forman turned the flea market venture into a \$250 million business, Rutgers invited him to deliver the commencement address at its school of business to share the lessons he learned.

"The first lesson is to have faith," he says. "Have no fear. When I started, I didn't know what fear was. I wasn't afraid of competition. I just knew what I wanted to do.

"When I speak with young people today, I tell them to find the one thing they're good at. For one of my neighbors, it was selling pickles in a barrel. For me, it was selling T-shirts. I didn't have a lot of money, but I had conviction."

Perseverance

The second lesson: "Life is an evolution. You're going to strike out a lot, so persevere. Survive. That's the lesson of Passover."

For Forman, perseverance meant applying what he learned at the flea market. "That's where the customer is right in front of your face, and you're competing

against the person next to you. You can't teach that in a classroom. It's the school of hard knocks. It's where the rubber meets the road."

Forman was 21 when he opened his first store in a burnt-out alleyway off a main street in Philadelphia. "Because I was from the flea market, I understood it. I got it really cheap. We sold sweatshirts and T-shirts. It did really well."

Faith and perseverance translated into profits and growth. For many years, life was good.

Then last year, an eye-opening experience shook Forman's foundation.

He agreed to participate in *Undercover Boss*, a reality TV show designed to show employers what their employees are experiencing. Disguised with a '70s-style mullet haircut, glasses and mustache, Forman



A heavily disguised Rick Forman (right) took part on the *Undercover Boss* reality TV show and learned valuable lessons from his employees. To thank and reward Curtis (left), a maintenance supervisor, for input that helped get the company back on track, Forman gave him a promotion, a raise and \$250,000 for a new home.

became Brad Bandini, an ex-football coach looking for work. He trained under four of his own employees.

"The show's producers picked employees working in the trenches who I didn't even know," he says. "I was shocked at

Old-School Selling on page 10

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metro

Old-School Selling from page 8



The new store in Pontiac

what I learned."

As he went through the training, he asked his employees about their lives. He learned about the hardships they faced, having to work extra jobs to be able to provide for their children. He learned that his employees were not happy and did not think the company cared about them.

"It's a disgrace that our employees do not feel appreciated," he said during the show. "This company's on life support right now, and I have to do something about that."

The experience led Forman to begin a profit-sharing program for employees.

Mitzvah

"We're on Earth to give back," Forman says. "That's part of our faith."

Opening stores in underserved areas is Forman Mills' approach.

"We're proud to build stores in communities where people actually live and work and that other retailers seem to have almost all but forgotten. We want to help create jobs and revitalize communities."

Forman Mills entered the Detroit market in 2005. "I remember reading in *USA Today* at the time that Detroit was the most depressed city in the country. I always look for that type of opportunity."

The first Detroit location was at 8 Mile Road near Van Dyke. The company followed with a store in Highland Park in 2006 and another Detroit store at Warren and Connor in 2007, then one in Flint in 2010.

The *Undercover Boss* episode also re-ignited the company's charitable contributions. Curtis, a maintenance supervisor who trained Forman on how to clean the store's bathroom, shared his life story. He is a recovering alcoholic who was once homeless. On his lunch

hour, he took Forman to a homeless shelter where Curtis distributed items he bought with his own salary.

"When Forman Mills started, we were all about the community, and now I realize that we were concentrating on growing and that we really need to get back to our grassroots. Curtis really made me realize that."

After his undercover experience, Forman announced to employees that the company would set aside \$1 million each year for a new community outreach program. The program includes a coat donation initiative, including suits for job interviews.

What Next?

Meanwhile, Forman Mills plans to continue its expansion with 30 new stores expected this year. "In Michigan, we're looking at Allen Park, Taylor, Livonia and Redford. We're scoping it out now," Forman says.

Driving the growth is what Forman calls "ridiculously low" prices. Sales include \$30 suits and 10 T-shirts for \$10. Some merchandise is name-brand, some is off-brand and some Forman Mills manufactures itself.

"Our stores are not just for low-income people," Forman says. "We see Jaguars in our parking lots. Everyone likes a bargain."

"We have an old-school mentality," Forman says. "We pass savings on to the customer. Sam Walton was like that. He would sell below cost, but he understood it was all about demand. If you create demand, you create volume. And then you'll make money later on. You've got to make money to be able to give it away. It's about creating real jobs and real profit, then you can be philanthropic."

For more, visit www.formanmills.com. □