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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

Chocolate—and a Mission to Help the Disabled

Daniel Friedman, 65, started a shop selling upscale chocolates in Chapel Hill, N.C., to help employ disabled people like his son



Starting an upscale chocolate shop, Special Treats, in Chapel Hill, N.C., was at first Dan Friedman's way of trying to help his son, who has autism. It has become much more. PHOTO: ANDREW KORNYLAK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By *Julie Halpert*

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When Dan Friedman opened an upscale chocolate shop, he had more than profits in mind. He wanted to employ people with disabilities, including his son.

Mr. Friedman, who is 65, divorced, and lives in Chapel Hill, N.C., has always been a high-energy entrepreneur. He launched his own music-publishing company in 1980 while touring with a band, and later started his own investment firm, which he juggled with part-time jobs in manufacturing and at a software startup in Los Angeles.

DAN FRIEDMAN

Age: 65

Hometown: Chapel Hill, N.C.

Primary career: Business and investing

Current path: Owner of Special Treats, a chocolate shop employing disabled workers

Why this path: "Customers are very supportive. There's a lot of hugging and saying 'God bless you.'"

He also has a habit of mixing business with social goals. Besides the primary goal of making money for investors, his investment company had a secondary mission of trying to revitalize communities going through difficult times. The company, for example, purchased run-down properties and lots and put them in the hands of people who wanted to fix them up, he says.

Mr. Friedman began winding down the business and selling off its assets last summer. But he wasn't getting ready to retire.

His next business venture would be shaped by his experience raising his autistic son, Alex, who is now 27.

Alex has a form of autism called hyperlexia. Children with hyperlexia have an advanced reading ability at the expense of their spoken-language skills. The Friedmans moved to Chicago for Alex to get help at a specialized clinic. Alex's communication skills improved, Mr. Friedman says, but he still struggled with conversational language.

So, last summer, inspired by others who employ people with autism, Mr. Friedman decided to open an upscale chocolate shop.

“It was a combination of creating a job for my son and creating a job for other people like my son,” he says.

The demographics of the neighborhood he chose suggested that a modest luxury item like premium chocolate would be in demand, and the nearest competitor was miles away.

But most important, he says, was that it would create a positive environment for his son and other disabled workers.

“People who come in to buy chocolate are in a good mood,” he says.

Special Treats opened in Chapel Hill in August. Mr. Friedman and Alex worked together in the store. Alex initially greeted and waited on customers. But within a few weeks, Mr. Friedman learned that his former wife, who is Alex's guardian, would be moving to Idaho where she has family, and that she would be taking Alex with her.

“I was crushed,” Mr. Friedman says. Still, he felt strongly about providing opportunities for other disabled workers and has kept the business going. In addition to selling chocolate, the shop has become a job-training site and internship opportunity for local special-

education students. Mr. Friedman hopes to start selling gift items made by wounded military veterans as well.

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“Customers are very supportive,” Mr. Friedman says.

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He expects to continue working full time at the shop for at least the next two years, and may open other stores in nearby locations. And when he's ready to step back, he hopes to hand over

managing responsibilities to someone young and enthusiastic who will continue to advance the store's mission.

Meanwhile, father and son remain close. In January, they met at a dude ranch near Tucson, Ariz., where they rode horses, something Alex has enjoyed since childhood. This summer, Mr. Friedman says they plan to do some riding and hiking in the Canadian Rockies.

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you're starting over, at reports@wsj.com.

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