

Dynamic Duo

Many small business owners decide to take on a partner. If they work well together, these duos can often experience success. However, I am impressed by husband and wife teams that figure out how to use each others strengths to create a successful company. Les and Roberta Farnum of Home Instead Senior Care have excelled at that. This couple not only runs a successful 24-hour-a-day company, they have also managed to turn a strong 26 year marriage into an even stronger one since they began working together seven years ago. They say the key to success is respect, and after spending time with both of them I would agree with that statement. That philosophy has helped Les and Roberta build a \$2 million operation in just seven years. And believe me, that's just the tip of the iceberg for this dynamic duo.



Tonya: Have you two always had that entrepreneurial spirit? What made you go into business for yourself?

Les: Speaking for myself, I actually did the same thing for 30 years – I was in the garment business. So I never pictured myself as an entrepreneur. I had a job, I was good at what I did, and it was comfortable for me. I liked what I did, up to a point. At one time I had about 400 employees. I ran the manufacturing plant for a company that was owned by a father and son out of New York. I was in an industry that had been dying more than a decade. I realized I had to find something else to do, because it was not going to be here much longer. So really, I never thought about being a business owner. Not strongly, anyway.

Tonya: So what was the deciding factor?

Roberta: There were a couple of things happening at the same time. Even though he said he really didn't have a desire, we talked a lot about it when we realized the garment business was not going to be there much longer. I come from a family of five siblings, and we all own our own businesses. I think because my father was a first generation American, that was an influence on me. I had a consulting practice prior to Home Instead, but I was only able to do it because Les had a steady thing going. For us, the

start of Home Instead happened for a few reasons. One, we had our own personal situation with his mother.

Les: Right. I'm an only child, and my 80-year-old mother was helping care for my 100-year-old grandmother out in California – that's where I'm originally from. And we saw the wear and tear it was taking on my mother. In fact, I had to make some changes. But meanwhile, I recognized that there needed to be some way people in our same situation could get some kind of help. This was several years ago.

Roberta: We saw that need and were looking for help ourselves. But around that time, our daughter, actually my stepdaughter, Les's daughter who we raised together, opened a Home Instead in Knoxville. We watched it for about a year. We said, 'Wow. This is exactly what we needed for our personal situation, and we know others need it, too.' Now there are over seven million long distance caregivers.

Tonya: So you saw a need there because of what you were going through, and then you saw your daughter take this and run with it.

Roberta: It was just perfect. It was a perfect situation for us, because we were looking for a change from what we were doing. His industry was dying and I was on the road all the time traveling, which really burned me out. And then we saw a company that was around to fill the need for senior care. We researched this industry and this business for about a year. We also did a demographic study.

Tonya: Did you always know you wanted to purchase a franchise?

Roberta: We thought a lot about doing it ourselves. We thought, why pay a franchise?

Les: We actually had friends say, 'Well, that's a great idea, but why would you buy a franchise?' But it really came down to, why reinvent the wheel?

Roberta: We had been meeting with people who were affiliated with Home Instead and just thought it was a great company. It's awesome. They're awesome.

Tonya: If you had to do it all over again, would you still go with a franchise for that same reason, or would you look at starting something yourself?

Les: I could safely say we would go with the franchise again.

Roberta: Absolutely. No doubt about it.

Tonya: What are the benefits of going with a franchise?

Roberta: The support from the home office is great. I'm just talking about Home Instead now. I don't know about other franchises. We not only receive technical support with their software and programming, but also have access to their marketing materials.

Anytime I pick up the phone and call our franchise support manager or anybody at their home office – there are 70 people there now – they are there for us. The network of other owners is amazing. There are close to 500 owners in North America and 650 worldwide in close to 10 countries. We are really close friends with other owners. They have become our best friends and our social life.

Tonya: Because of that support, if anyone was passionate about starting a business, would you say that a franchise is the way to go because it makes the whole process a little easier?

Les: From our perspective it has. It really has. And again, we can only speak for Home Instead. At any time we can pick up the phone and talk to the founder of Home Instead. We know him and his wife well. We've been to their home. This particular franchise is more like a big family.

Roberta: That's kind of their whole approach. I would say to anyone looking at a franchise to do their homework. Talk to other owners. That's the very first thing they had us do. I would say if the franchise is not forthcoming in offering information and offering opportunities to talk to other owners, that's a red flag.

Les: We get anywhere from one to four calls a month from people thinking about purchasing. And we are very straightforward.



Roberta: I hear him say, 'The first year is brutal.' So we are honest with people, and they want that. The home office wants us to be honest with them, because they want people who really want this.

Tonya: Because they want them to be successful.

Roberta: Right.

Les: They really do.

Tonya: That leads me to my next question. In less than six years, you two have been able to turn this into a \$2 million operation. What are your secrets to success, and do you consider that successful?

Roberta: Yes!

Les: Yes, we do. We do consider it successful, but we have a vision to do a lot more. The reality of it is that we are not even helping one percent of the senior population in Mecklenburg County. There are a lot of people here who can use some type of help, either a little or a lot. The great thing about this is that even though it's a service business, I never felt like we were trying to market or push anything. Because we have

something that will help people, we try to educate anybody we can about what we can do and how we can be there when the time comes. And when the time comes, hopefully we will be one of the organizations they consider.

Roberta: I think, too, Home Instead is a great opportunity for people out there that need help. There are over 140,000 family caregivers in Mecklenburg County alone that are caring for somebody, and they need a break. They should know that there is a service out there that they can call to simply get out for even three hours, just to do something for themselves. Seniors want to stay at home, and the people caring for them really need support. They really need to know what resources are out there.

Another part of what we do is try to form partnerships with other senior-related organizations in town so we can extend our services that we offer. For example, we have hooked up with Response Link. We offer Response Link's services free of charge to our clients that are with us a certain amount of time every week. We bundle services that will make it easier for them to stay at home and give families peace of mind. That to me is success: trying to see what's out there and how we can work together with other organizations to make it a win-win for everybody.

Tonya: I think you are in a very unique situation. You provide a service that is very much needed, and you have been able to turn it into a lucrative business. It's a win-win.

Les: But I have to say that if you're helping people at this particular level – many times in rehabilitation or in hospitals – you have to have compassion and passion for this. There are certainly a lot of challenges in this type of business.

Tonya: Even in a business that you have been so successful with and one that you both obviously love, you still probably have experienced challenges. What were some of the challenges you experienced starting out?

Les: Oh boy! Unlocking the door was a challenge. Just kidding. The biggest challenge, at least one of them, was six or seven years ago. This type of service was not something that was well known in this community, so the big thing was trying to educate people. A lot of our business is referrals. Professional referrals, social workers, hospitals, nursing homes, those types of places. So it was a slow educational process to show them how we could help in a way that had not been presented before. When they meet with the family, we are relying on them to say, 'When it's time to go home, we're not sure you are okay on your own. Here is something you might want to consider that can get you home sooner and make your transition easier.' So the educational process was a challenge.

Tonya: Many of our readers think about starting a business and starting one with their spouse. There are obviously some pros and cons to that. Can you share some of those?

Roberta: Initially we weren't sure. We really didn't know. We each had our separate thing for eighteen or nineteen years. We were concerned about how we would do it. But, speaking for myself, I wouldn't do it any other way. I don't think I can go home at the

end of the day and have anyone else understand what the day has been like. It's just that a lot happens here on a day to day basis. But I think why it has worked is because we each have our areas that we focus on and we each respect each other for what the other one does. That makes it work for us. I know that he supports me 1000%, as I do him. I know that level of respect is there, and that is the key. For couples, if one person is undermining another person's abilities, that's going to be a source of conflict. I have had partners in business, but it's a different dynamic. Respect is the key.

Tonya: Do you agree with that Les?

Les: Without a doubt. What's real interesting is that after having run a large organization and after being in management for thirty years, I thought I was good at doing all of these things. But only when we were able to bring Roberta in full time did I realize not necessarily what all my shortcomings were, but where all her strengths were. They brought a whole new dimension to our business: organizational skills, business development. You know, things I have trouble spelling. She is spectacular at these things, and we kind of found a great way to complement each other. I feel that is a big part of why we have been so successful. We work so well together.

Roberta: Also, what we created here is a family, and that dynamic is real interesting, too. It is like our family here.

Tonya: Knowing everything that you know now, is there anything you would do differently?

Roberta: I think if anything, I would have gotten out of the details sooner, like getting out of the bookkeeping part of it. Those things were not things that I loved. But we wore every hat out of necessity. But our continual challenge is finding a way to have a life outside of business. Business for us is all-consuming, and that's a continual struggle. I know we're not unlike other business owners. But our life in Charlotte is Home Instead, and if we want to get a break we have to leave town.

Tonya: What advice would you give other small business owners who would like to experience the same success you two have in such a small period of time?

Les: You have to be persistent. You have to be consistent in whatever you are doing.

Roberta: I agree. It's also about building relationships. For us, a lot of success has come from building relationships in the community with other businesses, organizations and associations. We're on the board of the Senior Center, the Better Business Bureau, and the Better Business Consumer Foundation. So it's building those relationships in the community, but it's also finding ways to partner with and serve the community. It's also about getting really creative in finding ways to motivate employees, because they are the ones who are doing it every day. We try to keep them motivated and excited about what we do, because I think it is so easy to get dragged down by the stuff that happens. So keeping them up and motivated and informed about what we are doing is very important.