

BUSINESS PROFILE

Sweetbay store manager keeps community at the top of his list

BY ALYSIA SHIVERS
Special to Florida Weekly

Managing a grocery store was a life-long dream for David Williams, who, ever since his days as a bag-boy in Texas at 15 years old, wanted to operate his own food store someday.

The food business was different back in those days: Bags were paper, not plastic, and baggers were required to escort customers out to their cars. "We worked for tips and the tips were good," Mr. Williams laughs.

His fascination with the grocery business goes back even further than his teenage years, however. He reminisces about childhood days tagging along with his parents to the Piggly Wiggly and watching truckloads of product rolling into the store on metal-roller conveyor belts. "I don't know why we sat and watched, but we did. And from then on, it had always been my goal to work in the grocery business," he says.

He worked his way up the ranks at various food chains as he moved around the country, getting a feel for nearly every department, before joining Sweetbay in 1996. He landed the coveted manager title of his own store, the one in Greentree Plaza on Immokalee Road in Naples, just last year. But achieving his long-awaited career goal does not mean Mr. Williams' work is done. In fact, the real work might have just begun.

Wanting to make his mark both inside and outside his store's four walls, Mr. Williams made the commitment to reach out to the local community.

"I feel you need to be known for something, and for me that was community

involvement," he says. His goal was three-fold: to help Sweetbay grow as a company; to benefit the community; and to put Sweetbay first in people's minds.

His first outreach took place after Tropical Storm Fay rolled through Florida, leaving many flooded-out Bonita Springs families seeking shelter at Estero Community Park for several weeks. By putting a call for help out to all the Sweetbay stores in the district, which extends from South Fort Myers down through Bonita and encompasses all of Collier County, Mr. Williams was able to collect hundreds of items from each store. Each store manager personally loaded up and delivered his or her store's contribution.

From there, Mr. Williams was off and running.

When an area businessperson opened his eyes to the Guadalupe Center and its needs, Mr. Williams once again spread the word to other managers in the district and got everyone to commit to working the Immokalee center's soup kitchen for a day. "A lot of them had never done this before, me included," he says. "It was quite an experience. It makes you really appreciate what you have."

Mr. Williams makes a point of involving all of the Sweetbay staff in his outreach efforts. When an opportunity presented itself to donate to the Candlelighters, a program that assists families of children with cancer, store cashiers good-naturedly challenged one another to see who could acquire the most monetary donations over the course of a day. Overall the effort was a huge success, with the nine Sweetbay stores in the district raising \$12,000 in three

weeks. Donations of food are also a big part of Mr. Williams' volunteer efforts. He makes frequent trips to the Harry Chapin Food Bank and St. Matthew's House in an attempt to keep the area's needy fed.

He's also behind other events that are simply fun and that bring the community out to Sweetbay stores for reasons other than to food shop. For instance, for Yappy Hour from 4-7 p.m. Friday, May 8, shoppers are encouraged to bring their pets to the Immokalee Road store to visit with pet-friendly vendors; inside the store shoppers will be able to partake of wine samplings while pet sitters care for their furry friends outside. Proceeds from the event will go to the Collier County Humane Society.

"Sweetbay lets us be creative," says Mr. Williams. "They are very open to new and different ideas."

The Collier County Commission recently

recognized Mr. Williams and his fellow Sweetbay store managers for their donations of food, beverages and their time to events hosted by the county's parks and recreation department.

Proud of what he's been able to accomplish thus far, Mr. Williams continues to dream up new ideas and partnerships. "I just want to be involved in as many community events as possible," he says. "It's good for the store, good for the company, and good for the community." ■



COURTESY PHOTO

David Williams, center, and his fellow Sweetbay store managers with the Collier County Commission proclamation naming Sweetbay Supermarket Day in March.

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