

BUSINESS

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Carlos Javier Sanchez / Contributor

Nature's Herb Farm on the far West Side was started by Shane Dunford's mother, Mary Dunford, with a homemade greenhouse in their backyard in the 1980s.

STILL LOOKING TO GROW

By Megan Rodriguez
STAFF WRITER

Shane Dunford was in high school when his mother quit her job as a waitress to start Nature's Herb Farm. It took him a few years to warm up to the idea of joining her, but by 1990 they were working together.

They've transformed a homemade greenhouse in the Dunfords' backyard into 280,000 square feet of growing space on the far West Side that produces plants for hundreds of stores across the state.

For years, Dunford's mother, Mary Dunford, traveled the world collecting varieties of plants to test in Texas' harsh environment. All the items sold

Founder's son who loves his work hopes for partner

at the farm today are the plants that grew best in the heat, or what Dunford calls "Texas-proven plants."

It took Dunford, 49, a few years to decide to join his mother. He studied to be an orthopedic technician after he graduated from high school, but he found his home working outdoors.

This is Dunford's first year running the farm since his mother retired as president. He said he's grateful for all she did for the company and looks forward

to a day when he has a business partner to pass the farm to when he retires.

Dunford spoke with the San Antonio Express-News at the farm on the outskirts of the city. The following transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: How was Nature's Herb Farm able to grow from a homemade greenhouse to the business it is today?

A: My mother, who started the business in her backyard, bought this land out here. She

said, "Hey, I need some help building some greenhouses. Can you come out and help me?" So I came out here one time and said, "Man, I think this could be something big." So I started working with my mother. At that time, she only had two employees. She pretty much was a hobby grower. She didn't really want it to be a big business.

When I came here, I wanted it to be a big business. So we originally were growing herbs in the field for package consumption. They were packaged herbs to cook with. We did that for eight or nine years.

I hired a business consultant to analyze my business. He said, "You see these packaged herbs

Dunford continues on B6

DUNFORD

From page B1

you're doing? You're not making any money. You're only making 6 percent profit on this stuff. You're making 35 to 40 percent profit on potted plants. I would get rid of the fresh-cut stuff and sell potted herbs."

I thought the guy was kind of crazy because it was 80 percent of my business at that time. But God has his plan already. That's what I say.

Two weeks later, Central Market H-E-B called me up and said, "Can you send some samples?" So, I grew some samples and I sent them off to H-E-B. They called back and said, "We want 300 of them."

I grew 300 plants and I drove down to Central Market in little bitty van. I pulled up and the manager was there. She was helping me unload the plants and she was going crazy. She was like, "Oh, my God. They're beautiful."

I came back to the farm, and she calls me up. And she's like, "You got any more of those plants?" I go, "No. I only grew 300. That's what you ordered." She was like, "We sold them all." So in an hour, they sold 300 plants. And she goes, "My boss wants to talk to you." So, I went down there for a meeting. And they told me, "Look, we're going to open nine Central Market stores. We really want you to do all of the herb plants for them."

We went from one greenhouse in a matter of 10 years to 280,000 square feet. Now, we service every nursery, every H-E-B, every wholesale place in Texas. And we just don't do herbs. We do succulents. We do perennials. We do peppers. We do a large variety of stuff now. I never imagined it to be this big.

Q: Tell me more about how your mom started the business and how you got involved?

A: My mom came to me my freshman year in high school, and she said, "Shane. I'm going to quit my job and I'm going to sell plants for a living." In the back of my mind, I was thinking, "Oh my God. We're going to starve to death."

My mom was a single mother, raising two kids. For her to quit her job waiting tables and start a business says a lot about her character.

You've got to be pretty brave to do that. Not a lot of people that do that. And a little crazy. Because my mom is a little crazy. And I love my mom, but I don't know if I'd have done that. To be that confident in yourself. I have a lot of respect for my mom.

And believe me, me and my



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This is Shane Dunford's first year running Nature's Herb Farm, located on the far West Side, since his mother retired as president.

mom still bump heads all of the time. I always think big, and she always thinks small. But she's the one who had the vision to start the business. And my mom always says, "I started the business, but you built the business."

She stepped down last year. She was the president for this whole time, but she's like, "It's all yours now." She's retired, but she was the founder of the business, and without her I would have nothing. That's the way I see it. And she's still admired throughout the plant community. She's known as the herb queen.

Q: You mentioned that you were interested in health care after high school. Why did you decide to change career paths?

A: I went to San Antonio College of Medical and Dental Assistants and got an orthopedic technician degree. I originally had no idea what I was going to do with my life, to be honest. I always did landscaping, my whole life. That was something I always enjoyed. Working with plants and all that. But I really wanted to try out the medical field. But it wasn't something that was my passion.

Then I came out here to work with plants, and it's just rewarding for me. I think it's just in my blood.

I get so excited to this day. I love to go collect seeds. I like to

develop new plants that no one else has. And that's what has really kept us ahead of the competition. We don't grow what everybody else grows. My mother went all over the world, collecting all different types of species of plants then she would grow them here. If they did very well here, then we would save that plant and we would start producing that plant. We call it Texas-proven plants.

But we're at the cutting edge as far as having the best plants to grow in Texas. And that's what is very important to me, is that someone buys my plant and is happy because it lived. Because then, I feel like you made a customer for life.

Q: You mentioned that you lean toward organic growing methods and are currently working toward the official certifications. What has that process been like?

A: We're working on it right now. This year we'll be certified for our herbs. We're starting off with herbs. Our soils are organic-certified already, and we're using organic-certified pesticides. The only thing we don't have is the certification, but we're already doing it.

But it's been challenging. There's one plant that is really hard to grow organic because it can have a disease that comes in on the seed that you can't see. One year, I threw away \$200,000 worth of basil. We

had to throw away everything.

I'm not the type to go to church, but my grandma's really religious. She was a Catholic. She always said, "When things get bad, maybe you need to pray." Well, that's the first time I ever prayed in my life. And I said, "God, I never asked you for anything in my life, but I don't know what I'm going to do."

We sell a million dollars' worth of basil every year. This is my biggest-selling plant.

And the next day, two guys were on my doorstep. And they said, "We hear you've got a downy mildew issue." And I was like, "Yeah. How did you find out?" They said, "You contacted our university, so we wanted to come out and see your problem." I went out and showed them. They said, "We developed a bacteria, and the bacteria eats the enzyme that the fungus needs to live on. We've used it in laboratories. Now we want to do field trials. We want you to use it and tell us how it works."

It saved my business. Somebody up there was looking after me. At that time, that was not released to the public yet so I did a year trial.

And no one else could grow basil, because it was a worldwide epidemic. The seeds were contaminated from a giant grower and the seeds went all over the world.

Q: What's your vision for the future of Nature's Herb Farm?

A: My dream is to find a partner. Someone younger and aggressive, like I was when I was young. And eventually I want to have them buy the business from me.

I would hate to see that I built this, and then I pass away and it all just crumbles away. All of that work for nothing.

I do want it to be bigger one day. I would like it to be about a \$3 to \$4 million business. But in order to do that, you've got to find good people.

I would like to find a partner to help me with it. Because in this business, the plants don't know if it's Saturday, Sunday or Monday. You've got to be here seven days a week. I honestly believe there's somebody out there that can help me with this business and help it grow.

Everybody's entrepreneurial dream is to eventually sell your business and retire. But I don't think I'll ever retire, because I like to work. I'm a busybody. I can't stay still.

A lot of people in this business fail because it's very hard. There's not as many growers as there used to be. So, there is a lot of business out there to be had, but you have to be innovative and have new concepts, new ideas and be changing things all of the time. It's very important.

megan.rodriguez
@express-news.net