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TOP STORY

5-decade career ends for grocer/restaurateur Diemer

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Jimmy Diemer, who made Jimmy D's Bar-B-Que a popular local brand, i from the grocery business.

By DON SERGENT/dsergent@bgdailynews.com

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After 55 years with company, Gipson to retire as Houchens CEO

Retirement has never been habit-forming for Jimmy Diemer, but maybe this time it will be a bit more palatable for the veteran grocer and barbecue restaurant owner.

On Friday, the 83-year-old Diemer strolled through his Jimmy D's Bar-B-Que restaurant next door to the Crossroads IGA grocery store at 5499 Scottsville Road.

He gave birth to both businesses and still owns the real estate – success enough to make any entrepreneur proud. But on this day Diemer grew wistful as he looked at shelves and coolers he must now clear out.

After nearly two decades in the barbecue restaurant business he entered as a second career after "retiring" from the grocery business, the end has come for Diemer.

Any doubts were put to rest just over a week ago, when a sign placed on the door of his restaurant announced that it had closed, ostensibly because he had no workers to man it.

The man who started working in his father's grocery store at age 10 and who rubbed elbows with such prominent local entrepreneurs as Jimmie Gipson and Buster Stewart has now found himself, maybe for the first time since his elementary-school days at St. Joseph School, with time on his hands.

"I started working for my dad at the D&F Market on Adams Street," Diemer said. "I swept the floor, stocked groceries and sacked potatoes.

"Then I was able to work in the meat department as a butcher. I was fortunate to have all these experiences. I loved to work."

After graduating from Bowling Green High School in 1956, Diemer continued to work at his father's store while also studying at both Bowling Green Business University and Western Kentucky University.

By 1972, Diemer had earned his business degree at WKU and had come to a crossroads.

“I had been doing the same thing all my life,” Diemer recalled. “I felt like I should be doing something else.”

He looked for opportunities in Nashville and other areas but “couldn’t find anything suitable.”

So Diemer decided to suit himself.

“I decided I needed to go into business for myself,” he said. “I started looking for grocery stores.”

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He found one in 1975 at the corner of Broadway and Magnolia, leasing space from Charlie Campbell in the first Diemer's Market.

Building his reputation on the fresh produce he was able to bring in, Diemer grew that grocery store to the point that he had to buy adjacent acreage for extra parking.

"That store was terrific," Diemer said. "It was heaven on earth."

The store's success was such that Diemer decided to expand onto property he had bought at the corner of Scottsville Road and Plano Road.

Working with a couple of up-and-coming builders (Stewart and his brother-in-law Bill Richey), Diemer

was able to open a second store in what was then a rural part of the county.

“A guy asked me why I wanted to go out in the country and build a store,” Diemer said. “But we hit it lucky. I put in gas pumps, and that worked out real good. We opened in 1983 and started years of constant growth.”

After a fire damaged the Broadway store in 1985, Diemer decided to concentrate exclusively on the property along Plano and Scottsville roads, eventually adding self-storage buildings.

The grocery store’s growth caught the attention of another successful entrepreneur, Houchens Industries CEO Jimmie Gipson, and led to Diemer selling the business to Houchens in 2005.

His barbecue business, though, was just beginning after being launched out of Diemer’s grocery store.

Specializing in smoked pork, homemade side dishes and banana pudding, Jimmy D’s earned a

following for its takeout meals and catering.

“The barbecue business has been terrifically successful,” Diemer said. “We even catered for customers in Lexington, Owensboro and even out of state.”

The once-booming business is now silent, with Diemer and his small staff now managing only the self-storage business; but the man who ad-libbed in a radio ad the “It’s habit-forming” line that would become his restaurant’s catch phrase hopes to keep the eatery’s legacy alive.

Diemer has contracted with a business broker, aiming to find a buyer who can make a habit of satisfying customers.

“It will take somebody who likes to work and will treat customers right,” Diemer said. “It’s not going to be easy, but I’m not fixing to sell it to somebody who won’t do it right.”

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