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Treasuring Life

Teresa Nelson has gift of survival, and gifts for others

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PHOTO BY GLEN E. ELLMAN

Personal service is key to success of Teresa's Treasures

Treasuring life has made small business owner Teresa Nelson who she is today. Nelson almost lost her life twice, but found her way and her niche in the small business world. Nelson started Teresa's Treasures, a gourmet basket business, in 2000. Getting there, though, was not so easy. She had been in a car accident with a bobtail truck right before she was about to graduate from Texas Wesleyan University in 1992. Being in and out of a coma, Nelson survived but had to learn the basics of reading, writing and walking again. This was hard for someone who said she had an IQ of 240, a photographic memory and could read 1,800 words a minute before the accident. "I never had studied a

Nelson said. "Sure, indirectly, the more I am friends with them the more they are going to remember me, but I get something out of it. I get more than money out of it; I get a friendship out of it and that is what I want." Steve Dutton, executive director of the Samaritan House, a non-profit providing housing and resources for people living with AIDS and HIV, says Nelson's services are unique. "We have found a convenient and cost-effective way to honor contributors and volunteers by sending them Teresa's distinctive gift baskets," he said "Each time we have done so, the phone calls and cards that result from our token gift let us know that they make the right impression. As we rely on the financial support and volunteerism of

day in my life,” Nelson said. “I would look at a page and two minutes later could tell you everything on it. After I got home, I had to learn to re-walk, re-eat and re-think because of the damage that had to be done. I lost all my long-term memory.” Nelson busted both kneecaps completely, had a blowout fracture to an eye, shattered the right side of her face, broke her nose, split her lip requiring 47 stitches, had a concussion and was in trauma for nine days. “They told me if I had been two inches to the right I would have went under the truck and been decapitated,” Nelson said. Two months after the accident, against her doctor’s wishes, Nelson went to Wesleyan’s awards ceremony. Her parents wheeled her in. The school knew she was coming and when she arrived, the entire ceremony stopped and gave her a standing ovation. She received her BBA in Economics/Finance the next year. A year after the accident, Nelson’s doctors did a scan to check her brain and they found a spot. At first they thought it was an aneurysm that formed because of the impact her head had taken. For a week, Nelson said she thought she had this aneurysm and did not know what she was going to do. The next week she had another scan and the doctor found she had a brain tumor. “I had just been up out of a bed for about a month when he told me this,” she said. “He said I could die.” She went to another doctor and was diagnosed with an Acoustic Neuroma tumor. It is a benign tumor that starts in the ear canal and works toward the brain stem; when it presses on the brain stem, the damage is caused, Teresa explained. “The second doctor told me ‘Teresa, the accident that almost took your life actually saved it because if we hadn’t of done this follow up scan, we would never know you had this tumor. Because of the post shock problems you are going to probably have, I would rather watch it for a while. Every six months we are going to scan it. Whenever it begins to grow, it has to come out then.’” Having just graduated, Nelson said she didn’t know whether to take a job. Her doctor told her one of the first symptoms she would probably have is hearing loss and to be aware if that happened that she needed to see him. One morning in July 1994, she awoke with no hearing in her right ear. “I waited for a week and finally went to see the doctor,” she said. The tumor was the size of a softball— it had doubled in size since her last scan. The 13-hour surgery was set for Aug. 22. During surgery, doctors saw a tumor larger than a softball; the brain stem shifted back because it had so much pressure on it when they removed the tumor. The tumor had grown to the facial nerve that controls swallowing, and if the surgery was not performed she would have choked to death. Again, Nelson had to learn to walk, to eat and to speak. Today, she has had

the local community, we believe Teresa’s thank you gifts also help people remember Samaritan House in a positive way.” What makes Teresa’s Treasures different is the unique items she carries. Nelson has 700 vendors and nearly 2,000 items. She orders her items from small businesses like hers. She attends mostly small shows and gets products from the momand- pop companies. She likes to be able to talk to the owner and find out all about the items. Her goal is to have items no local competitors carry. Orders have been sent out of the country to Ireland and many to Canada and all across the U.S.. The President and Air Force One have received baskets from Teresa’s Treasures. Nelson will go to other cities and states if a person is interested in her service. “I’ll go anywhere I can because to me face-to-face is going to sell it,” she said. “They are meeting me, they know who is behind it, they know what I believe in, how I feel about things and that is what is going to sell the product. We really go out of the way to make the customers feel special.” Nelson has mostly food items, including sugar free products. She also carries lines of bath products with no alcohol or mineral oil. Some competitors set a minimum price for baskets, but Nelson believes she has a niche for smaller items. She has approximately 300 items under \$10. She goes after the small market while many competitors do not. Photos can be sent to customers interested in sending a basket. Nelson makes a basket and takes digital images of what a person wants put together and sends it to them to make sure that is what they want. The person can say add something else or take out that item. “It is a matter of listening and learning what everybody wants,” Nelson said. With the help of Nelson’s husband, Dennis, who works with his wife on his days off, the company this year has done 65 percent of total sales from last year. When Nelson started in January of 2000, Valentines Day pulled in 250 orders without any advertising. Christmas 2000 took in 1,200 orders. And even with the 9-11 attacks, Christmas 2001 brought in 4,000 orders. “Between Dec. 12 and 15, it was unbelievable,” Nelson said. “They were just coming out of everywhere. I was doing about three grand every day, seven days a week the entire month of December. Normally we have our orders come in early October at the latest. In fact, I already have six customers this year that ordered things for Christmas. It depends on the year. I’m hoping nothing like that happens this year. “I tried to tell my clients last year ‘your customers were customers with you from January through September and you need to thank them even if it’s with a \$2 gift. You need to recognize them. It is

six years of clean scans, but there always a risk the tumor could recur. During her employment with J.C.Penney as a financial analyst, she worked developing gift designs at home. In January of 2000, she began her fulltime job as a small business owner in Fort Worth. From working out of the house to finding a showroom in south Fort Worth, she has found the niche of making customers friends. Before her accident, Nelson had worked at Wal-Mart in the pharmacy. She met the late Sam Walton and actually became friends with him. She says advice he gave her is the basis of how she started her business. He told her, "If you will treat your clients as your best friends and if you always treat your colleagues or customers as your best friends—they will always be your best friend." She said another thing he said to her was: "Always use your common sense. If you don't have that then you will never make it. I don't care how many degrees you have or how high your IQ is, you will never make it." "I learned a lot from Sam," Nelson said. "That is how I started my business philosophy. I don't set out to have customers. I don't want to have a customer. I set out to make an appointment and show them what I have and the product will speak for itself—the quality, the uniqueness, all that is going to speak for itself. "I don't have to push anything. If I befriend them because that is what I want to do, some of my best friends now turned out to be customers a couple of years ago. I know all about their families, I know about their kids, I know about their hobbies. It started because of one phone call. Now they are friends of mine. I don't want to have a bunch of customers. I don't consider anybody a customer. I consider them all friends." When Nelson sends out greeting card to clients and vendors she makes sure it is personalized. It is not from Teresa's Treasures, but from Teresa Nelson. "I don't want anything out of it,"

going to make a difference. You need to realize your customers are there for you no matter what happens. Same way with employees. You don't take advantage of things like that. Good employees are a gem, you do everything you can to keep them." Nelson is a member of the Burleson Chamber of Commerce and is an ambassador for the Fort Worth Chamber. She does lectures at churches and civic organizations about the things she had to overcome in her life. She also volunteers with her hometown of Everman. This year she is making gift baskets for the animal shelter. She is involved with Heritage Baptist in Lake Worth. She is looking for a publisher because she is writing a book about her life. Nelson has been through rough times, but believes she has found her calling as a small business owner. "As a whole, gift baskets is one of the worst misconceptions," Nelson said. "Any and everybody could do a gift basket, supposedly. What I do is designing. It is not the matter of sticking stuff in a basket. It is designing, coordinating colors and bringing things together. It is an art. I don't have a little business. I have a 24- hour-a-day job. It is a lot of hard work. I have to really fight to get passed that image. "It is about being able to set a goal. When I can meet a big goal, a part of my old self is finally trying to surface."

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