

# The Leading Lady of Lunches

Ruthie Burd, Founder and CEO of The Lunch Lady, serves up healthy school lunches for children

By Roma Ihnatowycz

Necessity, as they say, is the mother of invention. And so it was when Ruthie Burd found herself contemplating her career options as a mother with young children in the early 1990s. She decided she needed something that was flexible enough to allow her to take care of her kids, one of whom suffered from autism.

After reading about a company that delivered sandwiches to office workers, Burd decided she could borrow from the concept to start a business delivering ready-made lunches to parents of young school children.

"I had the silly idea that I could drop ready-made school lunches to people's houses at 7:30 in the morning," laughs Burd, now CEO and President of the Lunch Lady Group. "And then I realized that nobody wants lunches dropped at their door at 7:30 in the morning!"

But Burd was not deterred. She had already faced some tough professional challenges – most notably when she moved to Jamaica to start a window blind company: "It's not as glamorous as it sounds," says Burd. "It was a challenging environment to do business in, but I liked all the challenges

and I liked being my own boss.”

This was top of mind when Burd returned to Canada and started a family with her second husband in North York, Ontario. However, while her idea of starting her own school lunch business had obvious merits, it was initially a very tough sell. The year was 1993, and many people still assumed that parents had all the time in the world to prepare their children’s lunches.

“Nobody actually wanted it,” says Burd of her less than auspicious beginnings. “It was seen as a poverty issue. I remember one principal telling me that it wasn’t necessary, that parents were already spoiled and surely they could make a school lunch!”

The principal was proven wrong. After initially making ends meet by supplying lunches to local offices and gas stations, Burd hit the mother lode. Her son’s daycare program requested lunches for some of the older children being cared for in the early hours, before they went off to their regular day schools. It was her lucky break, her business grew, and in 2001 Burd sold her first franchise. Today, she oversees a chain with 48 franchises – 38 in Ontario and the rest spread across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia.

These days, business is booming – 10 new franchises were opened in the past year alone, and Burd recently added a third partner, Stan Newman, to her head office team. Newman, the



former president of Colour Your World, has taken on the position of Director of Corporate Development, joining Burd and her other partner, Chief Financial Officer Jim Essex, to help move the company forward.



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While the business has been a success, it represents more than just a money-maker for Burd. The Lunch Lady is about promoting nutrition in the schools and offering healthy alternatives to the many processed products that time-strapped parents often rely upon. The lunches are all nut-free and incorporate healthy ingredients like whole-wheat wraps and fresh fruit. There is a diner-style chicken drumstick dinner, Caesar salad with 'lite' dressing and, everyone's favourite, macaroni and cheese.

In short, Ruthie Burd genuinely cares about children, and their busy parents. In fact, one can say that Burd and her team of lunch ladies and lunch guys – 20 percent of franchise partners are male – were the forerunners in improving what has now turned into a major public health issue in the media: namely the shortage of healthy meals for kids in schools. Celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver, with their TV shows pushing menu changes in school cafeterias, have forced the issue into the limelight. But Burd and the Lunch Lady franchise partners have long been hard at work doing what they can to ensure school children have access to nutritious meals. "We give parents an opportunity to have a healthier alternative and save time from packing it themselves," notes Burd. "So it's a time saver and it helps schools create a healthier food environment for their students."

Governments have now also stepped up to the plate, which

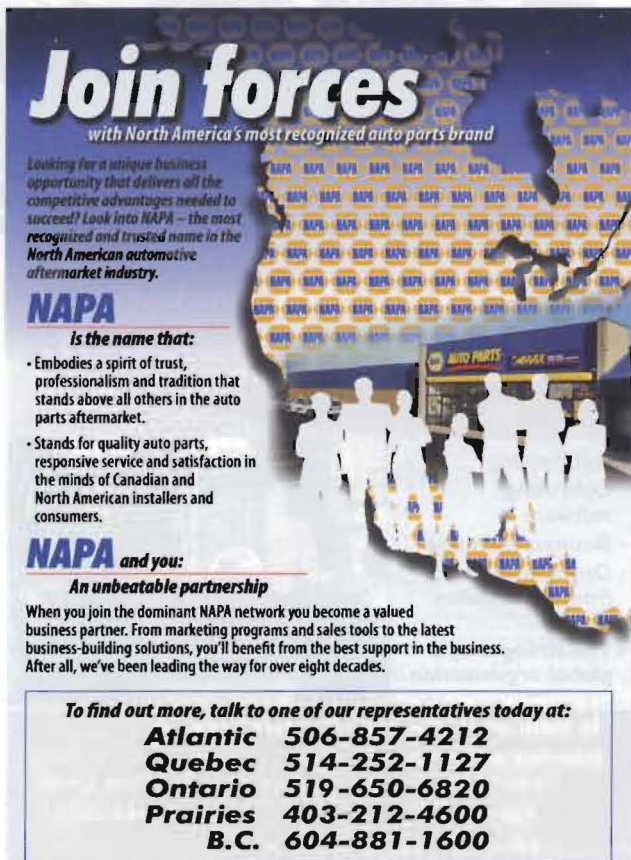
is only expected to help boost the Lunch Lady's expansion plans. Last January, Ontario's Ministry of Education introduced new regulations under the Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act with new stringent nutritional guidelines for schools. "Everyone agrees that they want their children to be healthy, so somebody at some point has to walk the talk," says Burd.

The Lunch Lady is also involved in school fundraising efforts, delivering a generous fundraising component with every lunch. The money raised goes to everything from school sports equipment to providing free meals to those children who need it.

While franchise partners come from varied backgrounds – from caterers to engineers to former parole officers – the one non-negotiable qualification is an interest in children and their communities. For Burd, this is a vital part of the success of the Lunch Lady franchise. Everything else – including cooking – can be learned.

"We're ultimately looking for people who really care about the well-being of kids," she says. "We also want people who are involved in their own communities and enjoy going out and talking to people. And if they have management or business background, that's a good asset. But those are things you can learn. You can't learn to like kids."

On top of a \$25,000 franchise fee, each franchise partner is responsible for finding and outfitting his or her commercial kitchen, normally between 1,200 to 1,300 square feet in size.



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This can cost anywhere between \$65,000 and \$90,000, depending on the guidelines and building codes of local planning departments.

The head office provides two weeks of training, including on-site training at an operational franchise, as well as follow-up sessions. They also supply menus and recipes for franchisees to choose from, and help out with signing on educational institutions as clients.

Once a Lunch Lady business is established, each franchise partner usually has a staff of eight part-timers to service approximately 25 to 30 elementary schools with lunches. Hot and cold dishes are packaged separately, and then the two are 'married' at the school and served in recyclable packaging to the children. Complete meals can be put together for an average cost of \$5.50, and can be ordered individually by parents online or by paper menu. Some franchisees offer more frequent service and package deals.

What's important for anyone considering buying into any franchise to consider, says Burd, is that they do not need to try to re-invent the wheel. In franchising, following a franchisor's guidelines is crucial for success, she says.

"You have to accept the realities of the franchise and adhere to its best practices," explains Burd. "The Lunch Lady has been around for 17 years so why wouldn't you want to get the benefit of that experience and take advantage of it? It's one of the

biggest benefits to joining an established concept."

For anyone considering franchising their own concept, Burd recommends finding mentors to guide you along, as well as business associates that can fill in the gaps where you are weak.

"You can't do everything well," comments Burd. "You need to focus on the skills that you do well, and bring in individuals who have the skills that complement your own. You need to be looking at the well-being of your company as a whole. Every franchise partner is counting on me and I want to make sure that we are giving them the best program possible." \*



## THE LUNCH LADY STATS



**Franchise Units in Canada:** 43

**In Business Since:** 1995

**Franchising Since:** 1999

**Franchise Fee:** \$25K

**Investment Required:** \$80K - \$100K

**Training:** 2 weeks

**Website:** [www.thelunchlady.ca](http://www.thelunchlady.ca)

**Available Territories:** All of Canada, U.S., International

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# Ruthie's Tips

Growing your business from an entrepreneurial start-up to a flourishing franchise system with locations across Canada takes hard work, dedication and a commitment to continually learn more about the business. If you are thinking about franchising your business, Ruthie Burd, Founder and CEO of The Lunch Lady, shares the top seven business lessons she's learned so far.

- 1 Every organization needs a cheerleader. In your company it is YOU!
- 2 Businesses are either growing or shrinking. They don't stand still for long. This means that any business is always experiencing some degree of disruption or uncertainty. Managing, communicating and supporting change within your organization is crucial to its long-term success.
- 3 Sometimes a franchisee is not a good fit for your organization. Recognize it and act on it in a timely way. An exit plan should be part of your franchise development strategy.
- 4 You won't be right all the time, but it is important to take action and make decisions. A poor decision can be replaced with a better one. Nothing good comes from sitting on the fence.
- 5 Listen to criticism. It is usually more useful than praise.
- 6 Everyone is NOT going to like you all the time but in the end, respect is more valuable than popularity.
- 7 Build a strong team. Look for team members and/or partners that have skills that complement your own and fill in the gaps where you may be weak or lack expertise. Never forget to say thank you!
- 8 Learn everything you can. Join an organization like the Canadian Franchise Association to take advantage of the many learning experiences they offer. It is also a wonderful place to find a mentor, discuss ideas, and enjoy the support and generous advice of your peers in the industry.
- 9 As my Dad used to say: "Money works best when everybody has some." A successful franchise system is one where everyone benefits from the relationship.

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