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Clemson grad makes his own job at Pita Pit

By Angelia Davis · Staff writer · February 14, 2010

CLEMSON – Instead of looking for a job after graduation, 22-year-old entrepreneur Justin Kopelman encourages college students to go out and make one.

That's what he did last year by opening the Upstate's first Pita Pit restaurant franchise on College Avenue in Clemson.

Kopelman, who graduated from Clemson University in May 2009, is now making plans to open a restaurant in downtown Greenville.

The West Virginia native describes his entrepreneurial experience thus far as both eye-opening and rewarding.

A business management major, Kopelman said he knew the business side of ownership, but the actual running of the business overwhelmed him a bit.

"There's a lot of work behind the scenes," Kopelman said. "Everyday gets better."

His advice to other graduates is if you have an idea, simple or big: "Definitely go with it."

"A lot of the big businesses started out with a simple idea. Especially in this day and age with the economy, there are a lot of things you could do. You can make your own market," he said.

Many young adults are doing just that. Michele Abraham, director of the South Carolina Small Business Development Center, said as part of a general trend, there has been a significant increase in young people looking to start their own businesses.

A lot of that, she said, comes from the fact that they've seen their parents and grandparents go through corporate downsizing and mergers where they've lost their jobs, even after they've been with a company for many years and have been a loyal employee.

"It tends to cause them to look at something that will give them a little more control over their own destiny," Abraham said. "Even a lot of parents look to having their children own their businesses for the same reasons as opposed to (them) going to work for somebody else."

Joel Stevenson, executive director of the University of South Carolina Technology Incubator, said that "necessity becomes the mother of invention," and if you lose your job or can't find one, you're likely to start one.

That may be a reason for the increased interest in the incubator program, which is home to both regular and student companies.

The program provides opportunities for entrepreneurs to commercialize their ideas, produce successful, financially viable and freestanding businesses, and create additional jobs in the community. Its partners include Greenville and Midlands technical colleges.

The incubator had 13 student companies last year and three have entered this year, Stevenson said.

"We're going to be putting more and more student companies in here in a couple of weeks, so we're off to a real good start," he said.

"I see that they understand the program and what we're about, but with the economy not as strong as we want, they want to start a business," he said.

Pita Pit Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho-based Pita Pit USA, Inc. The restaurant chain was originally founded to provide a healthy quick service alternative to the other fast food menu options out there, said Kevin Quinn, Pita Pit's director of franchise development.

Kopelman began making a market for Pita Pit in Clemson after his first visit to the restaurant in Athens, near the University of Georgia.

He liked the healthier menu items and that "it was open late and it was packed."

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Kopelman had worked at Beezer's Gourmet Sandwich Shop in Clemson. It was the late night hangout for students and others there until it closed two years ago, he said.

"I started talking to people about Pita Pit. A lot of people from Clemson knew Pita Pit from other schools. I also looked into the fact that late night, there wasn't another option in Clemson," he said. "Ever since then, Pita Pit as intrigued me."

Kopelman opened the Clemson restaurant in October 2009. He hopes to open a Greenville store by July, though he has not chosen a site.

There are 180 Pita Pit restaurants in 38 states, Quinn said. The South Carolina restaurants are in Clemson, Columbia and Charleston.

The Pita Pit concept was situated on or near college campuses. The company has expanded its target locations to include small and mid-sized market areas as well.

Both Kopelman and Quinn said downtown Greenville is a good fit for Pita Pit because it a young town, with lots of young professionals

"A lot of them went to colleges where a Pita Pit was and that would help," Kopelman said.

They also cited the daytime business population and the vibrant downtown night life.