



# NORTHERNlights

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## L'chayim: ICONIC MICHIGAN DELI GETS BUY-IN FROM TWO ENTREPRENEURIAL EMPLOYEES

By AMY LANE



At 21, Brandon Tinker and Marc Crossman are taking a step often reserved for those much older: Owning a business.

And not just any business – an established, 30-year-old Jewish deli with three locations and steady customers. Benzie County's **L'chayim Delicatessen** has been a longtime, successful pursuit of founder Jonathan Clark and he's now sharing the helm with Tinker and Crossman, two young men he hired three years ago out of high school.

"They're go-getters," Clark said. "I think they are willing to do what it takes in order to be successful."

In May, Tinker and Crossman bought into the Beulah and Frankfort business that's taught them bagels, sandwiches and much more. What started as a summer job for two friends graduating from Benzie Central High School has grown into a career path and now entrepreneur status – something neither fully pictured when they headed off to college in 2019.

At the time, Crossman was seeking a degree in business administration from Traverse City's Northwestern Michigan College and Tinker, a classical music degree from the University of Michigan.

For Tinker, the UM track was a natural progression after four years of musicals and other activities in high school. "I had absolutely no expectation to be doing this," he said of L'chayim ownership. "I thought I would be doing more musical things, acting things, thought I would still be in college."

But his perspective changed, after coronavirus shut-down interrupted in-person learning and sent him home to continue classes. Tinker said he began thinking about the usefulness of a music degree and considering the need for "a little more of a practical job."

### A Big Move

Crossman, meanwhile, was working at L'chayim year-round in between his NMC classes, which also went online due to COVID-19. He initially had thoughts of transferring to another school after getting his associate's degree, but then opportunity knocked: Clark's L'chayim partner David Scott was interested in stepping away from the business and the idea of ownership was broached to Tinker and Crossman, who had also been talking with Clark about expanding to a third location in Glen Arbor.

A plan came together.



The Glen Arbor location has seen steady business since opening its doors on July 1st.

"We decided we would buy out David and open the new store, all in one big move," Crossman said.

For Tinker, it was a decision that was comfortable – working close to home, friends and family – as well as exciting. Telling his parents he was going to leave school and "go into the deli business," he had their support.

"They were prepared to offer collateral (for a loan) because I don't have any collateral, I'm 21," Tinker said. "They were ready to 100 percent support me, and I really do appreciate that."

For Crossman, it was the realization of something he'd been thinking about for years: Following in the footsteps of his father, who had owned a local deli. "That made me want to be a business owner myself," Crossman said. "All of his success, sort of inspired me to want to try it myself. The opportunity presented itself, so I jumped on it."

While bringing in Crossman and Tinker, Clark is the majority owner in a business he has built – and runs – with pride. A Beulah native whose parents owned men's and women's downtown clothing stores, Clark started L'chayim after moving back home in the early 1990s from the Boston area, where he'd frequented Jewish delis. With none in Benzie County or surrounding areas, he launched the unlikely business idea, Clark said, "against great odds."

He opened in June 1992, occupying 300 square feet in a Beulah marketplace run by his mother. Some three years later, he moved a couple storefronts down Main Street, into his current location of about 2,000 square feet.

Further expansion over the years brought him to downtown Frankfort where Clark saw opportunity and proximity in a spot close enough for the deli's offerings – including bagels, breads, pastries, desserts and salads made in Beulah and food deliveries stored there in a walk-in cooler – to be transported between locations.

"We didn't have to duplicate the capital investment that we had made in Beulah, in Frankfort," Clark said, a business model continuing with the new spot in Glen Arbor.

Location has factored into 30 years of success, but quality of service and product are paramount. "We have always striven to provide the best service, above and beyond, and we think we have a pretty good product," Clark said.



The well-loved bagels will continue to be made at the original Beulah location.

**"If you look for opportunities, you will find them. You just need to look. Be prepared for how much work it is, though. There's no such thing as a nine to five when you own your own business."**

Marc Crossman, L'chayim Delicatessan

## Preserving Success

It's a legacy that Crossman and Tinker appreciate.

"There's definitely a responsibility to keep this going and maintain it and grow it even," Crossman said. "I don't necessarily feel nervous about it so much, because I'm confident in our capabilities. But it does come with a big responsibility."

Tinker said preserving success, and even evolving, requires care and attention to maintaining a consistent level of service and standards. "I really do want to make sure we hold what L'chayim was when it was just Beulah, or when it was Beulah and Frankfort: A nice place to have a bagel," he said.

**State Savings Bank** provided the lead financing to buy out Scott's interest in the business, with **Venture North Funding & Development** supplying a loan toward down payment, filling a gap to close the bank deal, said Venture North business development specialist Steve Brower.

He said Venture North works with entrepreneurs to help them finance, expand, or, as with L'chayim, buy into a business, and can tailor its loan programs "to the needs of the client, and help them make their dreams come true."

Brower said he sees Crossman and Tinker as “very focused on what they want to do with their lives” and committed -- “at a very young age” -- to the business.

L’chayim’s long business track record and successful growth, with a solid base of employees and clientele, are positives, Brower said. So is Clark’s continuing role and involvement; he’s someone the young men can lean on for guidance and support, Brower said.

“He’s going to be the one who’s going to help make sure the right decisions continue to be made, will allow time for Marc and Brandon to mature in running the business. It’s always helpful when the current owner is on board, staying involved in the business,” Brower said.



Employee satisfaction is a priority, says Clark.

## Excitement, Commitment, Fun

Clark said that as Crossman and Tinker have worked in the business, they’ve listened and learned. And that’s among what gives him confidence in their abilities.

“I’ve trained them...and it’s taken. Someone will ask them a question...and what comes out of their mouth is exactly what would come out of mine. They listened for all those years,” he said.

“They’re as honest as the day is long. Their leadership skills are high, communication skills are high, they work well with their fellow employees,” Clark said. “Sometimes it’s stressful, but for most of the time, we try to keep things on an even keel and light...and those guys are good at it.

“They have the pieces, so now we’re going to work with the management style...and the fine tuning. What it takes to run a business day after day after day.”

The two aren’t put off by hard work. Other young people looking to own a business need to be prepared to work hard and be ready to commit, Tinker said. Added Crossman: “If you look for opportunities, you will find them. You just need to look. Be prepared for how much work it is, though.

“There’s no such thing as a nine to five if you own your own business. You’re going to have early, early mornings and late, late evenings. It can be nerve-wracking, but it gets easier as you go.”

Near-term, there’s the challenge of the new location downtown Glen Arbor, just opened with the start of July. Crossman will oversee that spot while Tinker will continue to manage Frankfort, where he said experienced staff can handle duties if he needs to help in Glen Arbor.

In all locations, satisfaction of employees, which Clark said total around 30 at peak season, is a priority the three owners share.

“One of the backbones of our business is our employees. They’re the face-to-face with our customers every day,” Clark said.

Said Tinker: “Our goal is, they’re not working for us, they’re working with us.”

Future expansion is something all three owners would consider, with Clark assisting to a lesser extent, but Tinker and Crossman said they want to ensure current locations are solid and steady businesses, before looking further.

Beyond the work, they’re having fun. “It’s the best it can be, owning a business at 21,” Tinker said.

And for Clark, bringing in new ownership, “I’m excited for them, I’m excited for me,” he said. “New blood is always good.”

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Amy Lane is a veteran Michigan business reporter whose background includes work with Crain Communications Inc., Crain’s Detroit Business and serving as Capitol correspondent for nearly 25 years. Now a freelance reporter and journalist, Lane’s work has appeared in many publications including Traverse City Business News.



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