

# It was all about fishing

Matt Stickland and Stephen Brown became fast friends, growing up across the street from one another in Waycross, Georgia. Together, they did all the things boys growing up generally do, but their real passion was fishing. Their carefree days came to an end when they went off to college. Stephen was destined to be an engineer and Matt pursued a degree in business administration.

Interestingly, Matt points to the time when he took a break from college as being a major learning experience. He did a three-year stint as a doorman for the renowned Ritz-Carlton Hotel on Amelia Island, Florida. It was great training for the future entrepreneur. The hotel has received numerous awards for its extraordinary service and is a high-end resort. It was at the Ritz that Matt grew to appreciate the value of great service. He also learned what he didn't know, and returned to college to earn his degree. Knowing how he would apply what he learned, made all the difference for Matt.



*Jacksonville location*

After college, Stephen and Matt continued to live in Waycross. They picked up where they left off, remaining good friends and fishing buddies. Stephen's engineering degree landed him a career with a railroad company and Matt became an insurance agent.



*Matt Strickland flanked by employees,  
Rose Dynoske on left and Sandra Branch on right*

The friends agreed that what they really needed was a boat. They decided to go into business for themselves to earn the funds to buy the boat of their dreams.

According to Matt, folks in Waycross love chicken, so the two decided to open a chicken restaurant. Stephen observed the popularity of Zaxby's restaurants in his travels and suggested they look into the franchise.

Their first store opened in Waycross, the second in Fernandina Beach, Florida and the third in Jacksonville, Florida. They not only own

three successful Zaxby's restaurants, they also own valuable real estate. The escalation in their property values is mind-boggling. The two made wise choices.

How do you successfully open and grow three restaurants? Matt says for he and Stephen, it was recognizing what strengths they each have and making the most of them. Matt shakes his head in disbelief when he talks about Stephen's ability to figure out how to do just about anything and how to fix everything.

Managing people is Matt's strength. He loves training employees and takes great satisfaction in watching their development. "Sometimes it's hard to believe how unskilled some new hires are. If a crew member shows a desire to do his/her job well, I have great patience. Watching a new employee's confidence grow is rewarding. After all, good employees are our greatest asset," said Matt.



Matt recognizes that everyone isn't going to work out. In fact, he can recite hires to successful employee ratios for each store. The greatest talent belongs to those who need a job, according to Matt.

Vendor relationships also fall into Matt's realm of responsibility. Several visited, while we were speaking with Matt, and it was evident that Matt and his vendors enjoy working with each other.



*Matt Strickland*

Critical to their success is Tara Strickland, Matt's wife, who handles the restaurants' accounting and administrative work. "She's my hero. She manages to care of and entertain our 18-month-old son and keeps the administrative functions running smoothly," said Matt.

***Everything changes***, and the day we spoke with Matt, he told us that he was buying Stephen out, so Stephen could pursue interest in other ventures.

***Then again, nothing changes***, the two remain friends and still love fishing.

***And some things never come about***—John and Matt never purchased the boat of their dreams. Opening and operating three restaurants is demanding, leaving little time for fishing. Free time now is precious and spent with family.

*Essential Capital takes pride in its role in Matt and Stephen's real estate investment. We congratulate these successful entrepreneurs and thank them for their interest in the communities they serve and for the jobs they created.*

Matt Strickland's Zaxby's restaurants can be found at:

2316 Memorial Drive, Waycross, GA  
1905 S. 14th Street, Fernandina, FL  
12301 San Jose Boulevard, Jacksonville, FL



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