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From frat house to franchise, UF alums tell Wing Zone tale

By ANTHONY CLARK

Sun business editor

Matt Friedman (BSBA '93) and Adam Scott (BSBA '95) started delivering chicken wings from the Pi Kappa Phi fraternity house in 1991 with $500 invested in food, fliers and a phone line. This year, they will open their 100th Wing Zone restaurant and take in an estimated $55 million in sales.

The University of Florida alums were back in Gainesville Wednesday speaking to UF business students to kick off their four-college tour to encourage entrepreneurship.

Scott said they were sharing their experiences to give back to students since "college markets catapulted us to success."

Friedman dreamed up the delivery business while thinking about what he wanted to do after graduation. At the time, he said no one in Gainesville was offering chicken wings, his favorite food.

While other frat brothers shot down the idea, Scott - a pizza delivery driver - was enthused. After they passed out menus on campus, their phone started ringing off the hook.

But they were outgrowing the frat house kitchen and wanted to open a restaurant.

Scott describes walking into banks, he 18 and Friedman 20, in their best suits, "which meant our only suits, with a one-page business plan. It was pretty comical."

"We got laughed out of banks, bank after bank."

So they turned to their parents, described as middle class, and with $5,000 loans from each set and $3,000 in profits, opened their first restaurant in September 1993 on W. University Avenue. They gave themselves $200 weekly salaries, raised to $300 in 1995.

Wing Zone opened a second Gainesville store in 1995 and over the next five years opened in other college towns - Athens, Ga.,...
Tallahassee, Columbia, S.C., Atlanta, Tuscaloosa, Ala., and Austin, Texas. The partners took turns moving to the new towns with their best managers. They learned how to lay tile and do their own plumbing and electrical work to reduce costs.

In 1999, they moved to Atlanta and started their franchise program. Wing Zone now has 85 stores, with 18 in the process of opening and 150 committed through next year.

Friedman said they plan to stay with the business at least 5 to 10 more years with 500 stores before they even think about selling the business.

Entrepreneur magazine named the company No. 240 of its "2007 Franchise 500." Inc. magazine has recognized them among the 500 fastest growing privately held franchise businesses every year since 1998.

Wednesday's visit promised to be mutually beneficial. Students in Professor Bill Rossi's Venture Analysis class took on the company as one of their projects, analyzing problems the business faces.

Friedman said they are asking whether to ban trans fat - is it really a health issue, what would it cost to change, should they market the change? They are also asking about the feasibility of their new dine-in lunch prototype store.

"It helps us get a real-world perspective on what we learn in class and practice what we learn," said MBA student Kristine Ferrone, 24.

Sara Brazda, director of development for UF's Warrington College of Business, said the reports help confirm CEOs' hunches or they'll use bits and pieces of the student reports.

Anthony Clark can be reached at 352-374-5094 or anthony.clark@gvillesun.com.