For 25 years the White Dog Café served tasty, fresh, affordable local food to hundreds of Philadelphia residents each day, while also sponsoring a steady stream of “table talks,” educational tours, and street festivals. Founder Judy Wicks recently sold the restaurant to another local owner, who then expanded with a second restaurant in the Philadelphia suburbs.

The White Dog Café models the BALLE principle of “Relationships Matter.” For Judy, business is about relationships and money is only a tool. She demonstrated this with everyone she bought from, sold to, and worked with. She showed how fostering relationships with other local restaurants could help build a whole local food system and increase food security for the region, and how forming local business alliances across sectors could increase collective competitiveness against global corporations.
Background

For more than two decades Judy Wicks’ wake-up ritual was to say to her bedroom mirror, “Good morning beautiful business!” Her commute to that business, the White Dog Café, was about 60 seconds, as she wound her way down the stairs of her three-story brownstone, through the offices of the nonprofit White Dog Community Enterprises, past the small gift shop called the Black Cat, and finally into the restaurant’s kitchen. Besides being a popular eatery and bar featuring local food, organic produce, and humanely raised meat, the White Dog became ground zero for efforts in Philadelphia — and nationally — to organize locally owned businesses.

If the White Dog had a “homey” feel to it, it’s because the building, located across the street from the University of Pennsylvania Law School, was actually Judy’s home for those 25 years. Each of the half-dozen sitting spaces in the restaurant has a special ambiance: tables out front resemble a neighborhood porch; a living room features big, bright windows and ornate lace curtains; a darker room hosts a bar, books, and a piano; a horseshoe bar stands next to the entrance. Scattered throughout the restaurant are amusing dog statues, pictures, and collectibles. The menu features its own canine label of wine, “Snaggletooth,” and a local microbrew called “Leg Lifter Lager.”

“It would have been impossible to raise my children without living above the shop,” admits Judy. “A restaurant is so intensive, with people here almost 24-7… My daughter, Grace, was a busgirl at one point, one of the first sales girls in the Black Cat, and then became director of our community programs. My son, who is more shy, tended not to go down as much as she did, but he did work as a busboy and as our tech guy before he left to go to school. It has been a real family business.”

The White Dog Café started as a muffin shop. Judy tapped every source she could find for the initial capital: $30,000 from her savings, $60,000 borrowed from family members, $75,000 from a friend who had just sold a beach house, $50,000 in a low-interest loan from the Philadelphia Community Development Corporation. Her then-husband, an architect, pitched in with the renovation and design. As the land value escalated, in part because of the success of the restaurant, bigger loans from banks became possible — in the form of home mortgages, of course.
The White Dog’s signature was buying from local farmers, even back in 1986. “We started with fruits and vegetables,” says Judy, “mostly salad greens and baby vegetables. But gradually it became most of our food, in season all of our fruit and vegetables and year-round for our meat, poultry, eggs and dairy.”

The scale of operations — seating for about 250 people — has not changed much since the early expansions in the 1980s. Despite this, Judy reports, “For most of the first 20 years we grew every year; we grew in sales.” At its peak the White Dog Café did about $5 million in annual sales, including the retail gift store Black Cat. This is really a remarkable performance in an era where most Americans prioritize eating fare that’s fast and cheap — Judy’s is neither.

But after 25 years of her passionate pursuit of excellence, as well as her irresistible impulse toward assuming leadership in nonprofit activities, it was time for a change. Judy explained, “When you have 100 employees, [there are] always emergencies. Deaths, babies, quitting, firings. It’s what makes the business interesting, but it’s also what makes it tiring after so many years.”

In 2009, Judy announced that she was selling the White Dog so she could focus on her political and philanthropic work (described below). Finding the right successor, however, proved daunting. Ultimately, Judy handed the keys to a single new owner, Marty Grims, who already ran a few restaurants in the Philadelphia area. To preserve White Dog’s sustainable business practices, Judy kept ownership of the name and now licenses it to the new owner. The agreement includes a social contract that requires the new owners to buy local and fair trade, as well as a long list of other practices they must maintain in order to use the White Dog name.

Despite these stringent requirements, things have changed since the White Dog’s sale. Business has softened a bit — though some of this is due to the national recession. Events are now very rare, and a branch of the restaurant has opened in a suburban shopping mall, which has presented new challenges. The mall doesn’t have access to solar heated water, and composting is not permitted. On these fine points of the agreement, Judy says, “I’ve given them leeway because there’s nothing they can do about it.”

But on other points of triple-bottom-line performance, Judy has refused to compromise: “For instance, they changed coffee companies and said it was fair trade. But when I looked to see who they’re buying from, it wasn’t fair trade. The manager said, well,
they told me it was fair trade. And I said, well, there’s no fair trade certificate and this is the company that sells to McDonalds. They just didn’t know how to verify.”

“Another time I was down in the kitchen at brunch, and they were using liquid eggs for omelets, and I said, ‘Liquid eggs? You can’t get those from a local farmer,’ and it turned out that they were industrial eggs. The chef at the time just didn’t even think about it, they were so used to using liquid eggs because it’s so much easier than cracking all those eggs during brunch. It was never out of trying to pull one over on me, it was more just out of lack of knowledge and a lack of understanding.”

“It also depended on getting the right chef in there. They finally were able to promote a young chef, Eric Yost, who’s totally committed to the farmers. It’s not like he had to be convinced, because he’s younger and he started chefing at a time when local food was becoming popular. I also sent him to intern at Stone Barns for a week so he could learn more about cooking grass-fed beef. He goes out to the farms, invites me to come whenever I want, and he’s very committed. And he’s a partner in the business now, so I feel confident.”
The Competitive Strategy

One reason regulars keep coming back to the White Dog is that the food is superb. Customers were also drawn to the steady stream of speakers, community tours, and special events, all advertised through a quarterly newsletter that contained Judy’s sharp commentary on world affairs. “I think the community events identified the restaurant, our values, and what we stand for,” explains Judy. “I assume that’s a big part of our success.”

What kind of programs did Judy put together? “We did things like farm dinners and farm tours. We had a sustainable fish dinner. We did an annual cheese dinner, where we highlighted local cheeses. And we did an annual corn dinner, when the sweet corn was in season in the summertime. We started doing celebrations and special events around local foods, such as the Dance of the Ripe Tomato and the Farmers’ Sunday Supper.”

Why so much emphasis on programs? Part of the answer is that they were fun, and Judy was a great impresario. But she also viewed the White Dog not just as a restaurant but as a platform for social change. “We are educating on what I feel are the crucial issues of our time. We do talks on climate change, solar house tours, water conservation workshops — these are the things that people need to know.”

The programming also had a business purpose. “All of our special dinners, farm and community tours, festivals, and table talks would happen on our slow times, like Monday night or weekend afternoons. So it really impacted our sales significantly, bringing in another $1,000-$10,000 a week. And our special events made our restaurant unique. No one has ever replicated that.”

Since the sale of the restaurant, the programming has ended. But the work of building a sustainable local economy continues through the organizations launched by her foundation, White Dog Community Enterprises. These organizations include Fair Food, which runs the Annual Chef and Farmers Expo, local farm tours, farm-to-school and farm-to-hospital programs, and the Fair Food Farm Stand.

The personal signature of the White Dog is hard to replicate. Yet many aspiring restaurateurs from around the country read about the White Dog in Judy’s book “Good Morning, Beautiful Business,” study what Judy has done, and incorporate elements into their own businesses. “I want to continue to encourage young and idealistic people to use restaurants as a vehicle for social change.”
Exemplary Living Economy Principle: Relationships Matter

“All the teachings of Confucius can be boiled down into one word,” says Judy: “Reciprocity. You don’t take more than you give. Our relationships should be reciprocal. They must be win-win. The old economy is about exploitation, about taking more than your fair share, and about taking and not giving back. So, for instance, when we take a large amount of nutrients from the soil and don’t put them back, we wind up with depleted soils.”

That philosophy certainly guided Judy’s decisions about what foods to include on the White Dog menu. Judy’s greatest outrage was over the confinement of pigs in factory farming. After learning about this in the late 1990s, she removed all pork products from the menu until she could find a local farmer who raised pigs humanely. After learning of the plight of the factory-farmed cow, she switched to all grass-fed beef. After developing a menu where all the meat, poultry, and eggs came from small local farms, she did something unusual: she shared her farm sources with her competitors. If she really wanted to make a difference and build up the local food system, she couldn’t make this her competitive secret.

“As we started buying more and more, and especially when we helped grow the whole system by starting Fair Food and linking other restaurants to farmers, the capacity grew, the supply of the farmers grew in order to meet the growing demand from restaurants. As all the chefs started to ask for different things like arugula, things maybe the farmer hadn’t grown before, the capacity of the region increased.”

Moving from competition to cooperation in order to build a whole local food system, which increased the region’s capacity to feed itself, was a huge paradigm shift for Judy. As she began to organize other businesses in Philadelphia, she became interested in organizing businesses nationally. She joined the Social Venture Network, a national consortium of progressive businesspeople, and soon became its board chair. She despaired when she saw how many of her friends in SVN sold out to larger companies: Ben & Jerry’s was bought by Unilever, Stonyfield Yogurt by Dannon Co., and Odwalla Juices by Coke. One response was to help launch, in 2001, the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), including an affiliated
local effort called the Sustainable Business Network of Philadelphia, which was incubated at White Dog Community Enterprises. “The White Dog continued to be seen as the mother of the local economy movement in Philadelphia,” Judy says. “That grew our reputation.”

Judy traces some of her BALLE philosophy to early work she did in Chiapas, Mexico, working with the Zapatistas. After NAFTA was passed, she traveled there annually for a decade. “I saw that they were fighting for local self-reliance that NAFTA threatened. That they wanted to be able to grow their corn as they had for generations, and they wanted to have their own culture and to teach the children in their own language. They didn’t want to be drawn into the global economy in a way that would lose their independence economically and lose their culture.”

“And all of a sudden it dawned on me that this was the same thing that was happening at home. Our local farmers were also being forced off their farms, not with guns but with our policies, the Farm Bill in particular, where the large corporate farmers were forcing the small ones out of business, taking over their land, and creating big huge farms that were all monocrops. And that’s happening around the world. That showed me the importance of fighting for self reliance.”

Judy started a project to help the Zapatistas earn more money by selling their coffee. She organized the first export of coffee from the Zapatista community to the United States, investing with a friend $20,000 each to prefinance the harvest. “So, again, I modeled a process for developing fair trade. It was actually having relationships with the people that grow your coffee, or pick your cocoa beans, or whatever, and then developing fair trade economic exchanges. Our movement is based on relationships, not on money. It’s based on respect, understanding, and communication between buyers and sellers.”

For Judy, this is a formula for local businesses to succeed everywhere. “The cooperation I modeled in Philadelphia — I didn’t even think about it at the time, but people have told me since that that really affected them. When you model cooperation and generosity, it becomes the character of the organization. I used my profits to hire a staff person who then provided free consulting to my competitors. It was not only cooperating but also sharing.”

“I think cooperation and sharing are characteristic of BALLE and our local networks. Here in Philadelphia our local coffee houses got together and realized that their competitor was really Starbucks, not each other, so they formed an alliance, a fair coffee alliance, and they buy their coffee together in bulk for all the local coffee houses.”

“With climate change there’s urgency. We can either cooperate and share or compete and hoard. I think that’s the position that we’re in right now. It reminds me of when Martin Luther King Jr. once said: We have choice: chaos or community.”
Other Living Economy Principles

• **Ownership**  – For most of its life, the White Dog Café was an S-Corporation and Judy the majority owner. The new owner also resides in the Philadelphia area and the sale agreement prohibits starting other restaurants with the White Dog name if the majority owner does not live within 50 miles.

• **Place**  – Both in the restaurant and through her philanthropic work, Judy raised the consciousness of customers and businesses alike about the value of “going local.”

• **Opportunity**  – Mindful of her global mission, Judy worked to find her business’s best balance of the three P’s: profit, people, and planet. “When I had a good year profit-wise, I tried to figure out how to make the business more socially sustainable… like offering benefits and healthcare and 401(k)s to our servers.” She also paid her lowest-rung employees a “living wage” to ensure that full-time work raises the beneficiary family above the poverty line. For items that she couldn’t find locally, like coffee and cocoa, she prioritized fair trade sources.

• **Nature**  – Besides pioneering the local food movement in Philadelphia, the White Dog Café showed how to localize other inputs like energy. Judy opted into a local green energy program, making the White Dog’s electricity 100 percent sourced from regional wind power and other renewable sources.

• **Measurement**  – Now that the White Dog is under new ownership, Judy audits the triple-bottom-line performance annually. “Now that there are two restaurants, both chefs come to the audit as we go through everything. And the bookkeeper who pays all the bills, she’s my bookkeeper from before. And so everything is going very well. And I go in there quite often to eat, and always feel very impressed with the quality of the cooking, the quality of the ingredients and the enthusiasm of the chef for the farm-fresh product.”