

Diversification of properties pays off for Jackie's

Jackie's International, a hospitality corporation, based in Canton.

When S. L. "Doc" Sethi and his wife, Raksha, arrived in America from their homeland of India, the highly-educated couple sought employment at colleges and universities across the nation.

When Mississippi Valley State University offered them teaching jobs in 1968 — he was a biology professor; she taught sociology — they adopted the Magnolia State as their permanent residence.

"My dad believes America is the land of opportunity and Mississippi is the heaven land," said Monica Harrigill, vice president of Canton-based Jackie's International, a hotel and restaurant group owned by the Sethi family. "It's a beautiful state with loving people and kind hospitality. We love it here."

Yearning to expand beyond teaching college, Sethi became a Sonic Drive-In franchisee and opened his first restaurant in Brookhaven December 13, 1972. Over the next decade, he added Western Sizzlin' restaurants and Pizza Inns to his restaurant group. In 1984, he created a new type of drive-in restaurant, one with a checkered 1950s theme, named Bumper's Drive-In in a playful nod to vintage automobiles.

While Sethi was growing the restaurant business, he began adding hotels to the group, which he named Jackie's International, after the granddaughter of a family friend, Lina Hunt of Greenwood.

"Lina sold my parents their first house after I was born and they graduated from campus housing," said Harrigill. "Lina gave my dad the book, 'Think and Grow Rich' by Napoleon Hill, and that book motivated him to want to achieve more. He grew his business by that book and still quotes from it often."

Today, Jackie's International operates more than 70 properties in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee, including convenience stores and independent restaurants and hotels. The more well-known hospitality properties include Bumper's Drive-In, Western Sizzlin' Steakhouse, Pan-Asia, Hampton Inn, Hilton Garden Inn, Best Western and Comfort Inn. The privately held corporation employs more than 1,500 people.

"With the economy and growth patterns, one of the smartest things my father did was diversify," said Harrigill. "If the economy is slow, Bumper's does extremely well because people trend down to fast food. That compensates for people not traveling when the hotel industry might be slow. It's been a good balance for the service industry."

From the beginning, Jackie's International has grown as a family-operated business providing exceptional cus-

tomers service.

"Our mission is to operate profitable properties by providing guests at both our restaurants and hotels with a great experience at a great value with a commitment to, and focus on, quality," said Harrigill, who oversees operations, training and marketing for the company. "We strive to make our guests feel at home and give them WOW service — Working Outside What's Expected."

The family is actively involved with the India Association of Mississippi, a non-profit organization designed to keep the culture and heritage of Indian-Asians alive for second and third generations.

"Our entire family would agree that having a minority-owned business in Mississippi has not been difficult at all," said Harrigill. "Instead, our biggest challenge has been keeping up with rapid growth and finding enough people who want to be in the restaurant industry and



have the work ethic it requires."

Jackie's International has made a strong commitment to education. This year alone, the company has distributed more than \$44,000 to students throughout Mississippi. In the past three years, more than \$75,000 in scholarships have been awarded.

Last year, Bumper's Drive-In received the National Restaurant Association Restaurant Neighbor Award for Mississippi for its Bumpers Scholarship Program. In the late 1990s, the company established a school incentive program that rewards students in schools throughout the state with honor roll awards, perfect attendance

awards, goodie bags and special cards for teachers.

Also in 2004, "Doc" Sethi received an economic development award from the City of Ridgeland for his role in growing the Jackson suburb through the building of Bumper's Drive-In, Western Sizzlin', Palm Beach Tan Complex and Internal Medicine and Pediatric Associates of Ridgeland clinic. He also received an award last January from the Canton Chamber of Commerce/Main Street Association for his economic development contributions to the City of Canton, home of the Nissan automotive plant that opened in 2003.

