

Daryl and Tracy Kirby

Williston, Florida



Kirby Family Farm

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Daryl and Tracy Kirby:

Daryl and Tracy Kirby, Founders of Kirby Family Farm have created a one-of-a-kind resource and destination for at-risk, foster and special needs children, as well as train enthusiasts and history buffs. From holiday themed train events open to the public to outreach programs for abused children and those with incarcerated parents, The Farm is an opportunity for the Kirby's to truly make a difference. Daryl shared the story behind their journey, the impact they've made on the community and what more they hope to accomplish in the future.

"Before I moved to Levy County, I was living in Tavares, FL, where I grew up," Daryl said "At the time, I was in the video business and had some customers in Williston. I had contracts where I'd buy movies from big chain stores and would sell them to the mom and pop video stores. A certain store in Levy County asked if I'd give them an evaluation of a site

for another video store. I did and determined it was a home run. However, they decided not to do it. For me, it was an opportunity too good to pass up, so I decided I would do it. I was also going through a divorce at the time, so it was a great way for my two year old daughter and me to move somewhere new and patch our life back together.”

Daryl found success in his new home, got remarried to his wife, Tracy, started a new family and gradually expanded his network. When the real estate boom happened in the early 2000s, Daryl, who like most entrepreneurs, is always open to new ventures, identified an opportunity to get in the “game”.

“When the boom busted, I noticed no one in this area was buying foreclosures,” he said. “I wasn’t sure why because some were going for as low as \$10,000. Anyways, I saw it as a great opportunity. I started buying these homes and turning around and selling them, with owner financing, to other people. I also did a lot of vacant land and parcels and even some spec homes with a local builder I became friends with.”

Daryl continued, “A friend gave me the nickname, ‘The Mother Theresa of Hard Lending’, because many of the homes I bought and sold were purchased by people that wouldn’t normally qualify for a loan from a traditional bank. I’m still living on mortgage payments today and that’s ultimately how Kirby Family Farm got started.”

In 2011, Daryl took a friend to lunch and was informed about an RV park that was foreclosed on. The friend also mentioned a rumor of an old abandoned train on the property. Daryl, who considers himself a ‘train guy’, was intrigued and, after lunch, they went to check it out. There, buried in the woods and waiting to be demolished, was an actual narrow

gauge locomotive. For Daryl and Tracy, this was the sign they were waiting for.

“Tracy and I had talked about doing an outreach program for children in the past,” he said. “We weren’t sure when and how, but this was the sign we were waiting for. I met with the new developer of the property and made an offer to buy the train. They ultimately agreed on our offer because they were curious to see what we were going to do with it.”

Daryl shared that around this same time, he and Tracy were moving forward with plans to purchase a 110 acre space to, not only display and operate the train, but to also create and implement programs for their newly created charity. Even though they closed on the train before even securing the property, Daryl knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something special. They unearthed the train and moved it on December 17, 2011. Less than a year later – three days shy to be exact – the train made its first complete mile loop at its new home.

Today, Kirby Family Farm proudly owns and operates eight locomotives, several of which have historical ties to significant events, 16 Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus train cars and a fire truck that once served the space shuttle program.

Daryl explained what their original intentions were for Kirby Family Farm and how the non-profit has evolved over the years. “We never set out to be a museum,” he said. “However, we started acquiring all these train assets and so we were labeled an educational museum. We also never intended on opening to the public. Our primary goal was, and still is, to work with troubled kids and those without their own families. Over time, however, we learned that it’s really expensive to own a train. That’s when

we decided to create public events and open the trains to everyone as a way to raise money for the charity. These train rides and public events are now our main revenue drivers.”

Daryl shared that it took time to build the brand and to get supporters to buy into what they were doing. Overtime, however, many individuals and organizations saw the value and made donations to support the cause. Through complete transparency with funding and by providing outreach programs that support those in need, Kirby Family Farm has made a significant impact on the local community.

“We’ve host over 10,000 kids annually at no cost,” Daryl said. “We also have over 1,000 different volunteers per year. Through events like our Scary Train and our Christmas Train, we’ve raised money and brought together kids of all demographics and family dynamics. We also host mobile food drives and structure our programs by seeing where the greatest needs are. We’re proud of what we built and enjoy the success of our children. We’re also proud of the impact we’ve had on our volunteers. Some have been with us since the beginning. They see our priorities and they stay involved.”

Looking ahead, Daryl and Tracy are excited and optimistic about the future of Kirby Family Farm. Their goal has always been to replace bad memories with good ones for the kids they serve. They’ve accomplished that goal, but they’re also intent on doing more.

“We’re looking at transitioning into more of a vocational resource,” Daryl said. “We’re moving towards getting recognition and/or accreditation from local employers as a way to train and prepare our kids for the future. Many 18 year old kids that age out of the foster system have

nowhere to go. Our goal is to train them and equip them with the skills needed to land a job.

Daryl continued, “We’re in the process of building a train barn to house all of our narrow gauge train assets but to also have a shop. The plan is to move a local master-certified hydrologist into the space. He’ll teach kids the basics behind hydraulics and how they can make a career out of it. We’ve also spoken with a major freight railroad about building a curriculum together – one that would give our kids preferential treatment. They loved the idea.”

What advice does Daryl have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “There are two types of people out there – entrepreneurs and employees,” he said. “Not everyone needs to be an entrepreneur. However, it’s now more obvious than ever that just because you’re employed, it doesn’t mean your job is secure. Find your security in your abilities. Also, don’t be driven by money. Be driven by success. Lastly, if you decide to start a business, it’s important to understand that nothing is beneath you. You have to be willing to do whatever it takes to make it work – even if that means cleaning porta potties by yourself.”

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