



Timothy Totten

Eustis, Florida



Final Embrace, LLC

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Timothy Totten:

Even though Timothy Totten, founder, majority owner and managing partner of Final Embrace, went to college to become an architect, he always knew he'd end up working for himself. Totten, who grew up in rural Volusia County Florida, comes from a family of innovators, doers, makers and builders. If they wanted something new, they built it. If they needed something fixed, they repaired it themselves. This 'can do' attitude clearly rubbed off on Totten who's active in three businesses and also heads up a local charity race. "I've never been afraid of stepping out and taking a risk," he said. "Some people are so risk averse, but I know that even if I failed, it wouldn't be the end of my personal worth."

After college, Totten bounced around a bit but eventually found work with a funeral home. He quickly discovered he was good under pressure

and dealing with people going through difficult situations. Being the natural innovator that he is, he also discovered an opportunity for improvement and acted on it. "I went with my funeral director one day to pick up someone that passed away," he said. "It's customary for a funeral director to go to the house of the deceased and to bring the body back to the funeral home. It's also customary to cover the body, out of respect and privacy, before and during transport. The cover that we used was ugly. It was like this fake blue fur stuff. I thought to myself, 'the family's last memory shouldn't be of their loved one draped in this ugly blue cover'. I went to the store that night, bought a pretty quilt, cut it up and sewed together a cover. I presented it to another customer of ours and they were blown away. They couldn't stop talking about it. That's when I knew that this could actually be a thing."

For the next ten years, from January 2002 to 2012, Totten continued to work at the funeral home, but in his spare time, at nights and on the weekends, he worked equally as hard at building out his new business. Production took place in a one car detached garage, that required the use of a large cardboard fabric tube to prop it open, and the focus was on one product, the cot cover. Totten was quick to recognize the need for additional help and brought in several family members to make that happen.

"Growing up, two of my grandmothers taught me how to sew," he said. "They also taught my dad, Lynn Totten Sr., how to sew. When he was laid off, it seemed like a great opportunity to bring him on-board. He's been with me ever since. He and my step-mother handle many of our cot cover orders in their off-site production facility. My biological mother does the accounting. My step aunt is our production manager and

makes sure customer orders are completed. Some of my cousins help out in various ways. My grandmother is also involved. She's in charge of a unique line of products for us. She makes teddy bears out of people's personal clothing. If a loved one had a favorite shirt or blanket, we can make a teddy bear out of it. They make great keepsakes."

The market of supplying personal covers and viewing solutions to the funeral home industry is narrow and full of challenges. However, Totten is a savvy entrepreneur and made an early move to position his company for success. "Our competition is at a disadvantage because I sought out wholesale customers that would buy from me and then sell to funeral homes," he said. "I found a company that would get my products in the hands of their reps. They basically do all the marketing for me and go directly to the funeral homes. We now have 34 wholesale companies that resell our products."

Totten has done an incredible job positioning his company to capitalize on a specific niche. However, his journey, like most entrepreneurs, had its share of challenges. There were two instances, Totten shared, when he thought his business was done. "The first time was in the first year or two of business," he said. "I was only selling to one guy. He would buy the covers and then sell them to the funeral homes. His thing was that he would pay me after he got paid. He eventually owed me over \$3,000.

People told me to tell him to go pound sand, but he was my only customer. I had a chat with him and told him that I still wanted him to sell the covers, but that he was going on commission. I also told him that the first \$3,000 worth of commission would come to me. He was good at sales, he just wasn't good at accounts payable. Within a few months, he sold a ton. The second time I thought I was done was when I

received calls from 10 customers that the lining in their cot covers was breaking down in the cold. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to go under from having to replace all of these'. I couldn't sleep. I quickly set out to find a better lining. Once the new cot covers were ready, with a new sturdier vinyl lining, we acquired a bunch of new customers that weren't willing to buy before because of the old plastic lining. It was a stressful time, but it was an opportunity to make an improvement. I also learned that people won't tell you when they don't like something, they just won't buy from you."

Looking towards the future, Totten is focused on creating new and innovative products and wants to completely change what people customarily use in the funeral home industry. He's also focused on three other ventures. Totten is co-founder of a company called FunVenture, LLC. They create the play experiences of children and bring it to adults.

That includes a portable escape room, Christmas parties, Clue Live mystery parties, pop-up mini golf, scavenger hunts and more. Totten is also a nationally known speaker, expert and Master Storyteller on the topic of Frank Lloyd Wright, the world-renowned architect and designer. Totten took a strong interest as a child and today does about 40 talks per year on the subject.

If that wasn't enough, Totten is also the founder, race director and lead organizer of the Amazing Race for Charity, an annual event that takes place in downtown Eustis. Totten explained, "It all started when I was running a uniform shop and a salesman rang the door bell. He was selling ads for a community magazine. I thought to myself, 'there has to be a better way for businesses to connect with their customers'. I came up with the idea of a community-wide scavenger hunt where

participants race across the city and do challenges at 20-25 different locations. It's a lot of fun for the participants and great exposure for the businesses that participate. A significant portion of the proceeds are donated to charities. This past year we had 600 participants, 42 sponsors and donated over \$32,000 to charity. In the five years we've been doing this, we've raised over \$130,000 for local charities."

What advice does Totten has for aspiring entrepreneurs? "Get to know a good lawyer, banker and accountant. You will need their professional advice eventually. Most important is the accountant. No one has ever said, 'I should get into business because I love doing paperwork and managing people'. Another important thing is to not leave your full time job until you have a full year of living expenses saved. Lastly, there's no such thing as firing a bad employee too soon. If you ever have to manage people and you think they're not great, you need to get rid of them right away."

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