

## More than the American Dream

Don Larson

*Don Larson, founder and CEO of Sunshine Nut Company in Mozambique, works across faith and cultural lines to revive the country's cashew business.*

I was living the American Dream, yet I felt empty and unfulfilled. I had become a Christian at the age of 29 and had progressed in my faith during the next 15 years through study and discipleship. Yet I had a yearning for something deeper, something that would make life more meaningful. I was searching for purpose. The Bible says you must put your complete trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. I had made Him my Savior at 29, but I was planning my own life and pursuing the path I had imagined for myself. Realizing that my plan had succeeded but the result of this success was not fulfilling, I desired to shift from success to significance. I decided to do it as the Bible instructs. I surrendered my life on the wintry day of December 7th in 2007 and finally asked Jesus to be my Lord as well as my Savior. I was faced with decisions to turn away from the world and follow a path less taken – a path of devotion and obedience. I chose to follow that narrower path of obedience. As I pursued the Lord over the next two years, I fell in love with the Almighty in a deep and profound way. I had been blessed with time off from working, a hiatus allowing me time to become intimate with God. He had been waiting to take my hand and lead me.

God took me on journeys that far exceeded any of the intense escapades I had in my past. My life had been filled with adrenaline pursuits, as He designed me to take risk – whether that was flying hot air balloons, pushing the limits of my Porsche, cliff diving, or the many other activities where I felt life to the fullest.

After He captured my undivided attention and loyalty, God delivered my calling. It was not what I was searching for – quite the opposite. In the middle of intense prayer, I heard God speak to me almost audibly saying, “Build food factories in third world nations to bring lasting economic transformation, and to name it Sunshine”. That was not my thinking but the total opposite. At this moment in time I had been searching for God’s direction for my life. He answered. Now I had a choice to be obedient or go back to pursuing my own way. I chose obedience.

I was ready to switch from a life of desiring to make money and be successful into a life of desiring to please God and obey His will for my life no matter the sacrifice or cost.

In deep prayer, I asked the Lord to help me with a plan for bringing lasting economic transformation to the undeveloped areas of the world. In obedience, I called it The Sunshine Approach. The Sunshine Approach is a value-based business model where dignity, love, and community come together with excellence. It integrates values of ethical behavior, morality, and compassion. It instills dignity and operates in love. It involves the community to exemplify excellence. The focus is to replace dependence with independence, hand-outs with hand-ups, entitlement with earned, despair with hope, adversity with opportunity, stagnation with transformation, worthlessness with dignity, and failure with excellence.

With the Sunshine Approach model, food factories that process perishable crops into shelf-stable food products are the engine of transformation. Historically, the smallholder farmers have limited markets in which to sell, thereby leaving their crops rotting in the fields. Mozambique is a population consisting of 80% subsistence farmers. This model transitions farmers from farming to survive into farming to thrive.

Turning their perishable harvests to shelf stable gives them the opportunity to sell on a bigger scale and the ability to feed populations in famine. As we transform smallholder crops into premium products, we do so in a way that promotes hope, opportunity, and transformation. An emphasis on export to premium retailers opens a limitless resource channel.

The Sunshine Approach is a quadruple bottom-lined business model centered on an intentional transformational objective. The four objectives are:

#### **Financial**

- Realizing sustainable solutions far more effective at addressing the complex issue of poverty than aid programs.
- Reducing middlemen to offset competitive disadvantage inherent with developing nations.
- Successfully penetrating the most difficult markets by achieving cost competitiveness, profitability, high quality standards, and brand excellence.
- Building a reputation for trusted reliability, high customer service, and exemplary customer reviews.

#### **Environmental**

- Being proactive with addressing the environment and by implementing programs such as planting trees, minimizing energy consumption in the processes, and reducing waste.
- Reducing intermediate packaging by eliminating middlemen.
- Reducing transport of primary inputs to thousands of miles away.

#### **Social**

- Donating 90% of distributed proceeds from companies using the Sunshine Approach model to assist the communities where factories are located.
- Designing programs to enable people to prosper in the environment in which they live.
- Stopping dependence and entitlement by directing funds to those who cannot help themselves.
- Endeavoring to promote conditions which lead people to look for opportunity and hope instead of adversity and despair.

#### **Transformational**

- Providing gainful employment which allows dignity through a paycheck.
- Introducing value addition to smallholder farmer crops in developing countries to make high quality food products to be sold in premium retailers around the world.
- Intentionally uplifting the lives of the people involved in the primary input value chain through a holistic solution.
- Introducing solutions to the societies' needs that transform into long term benefit:
  - Sunshine House concept to care for orphaned and widowed
  - Beacons of Light concept to reach vulnerable children in surrounding neighborhoods
  - Providing opportunities for professionals in all fields (medical, dental, education, etc.) to partner with in-country professionals for training.

- Teaching the concepts of food processing, quality standards, and manufacturer reliability in the universities. Sunshine managers to take an active role in encouraging entrepreneurs to enter this space.
- Placing a high level of importance on education and improving your individual circumstance through knowledge and wisdom.
- Developing a culture of change by training staff to be persistent in overcoming obstacles. People must learn to enjoy the obstacles, relish the trials, seize the possibilities, and fight to implement the solutions.
- Modelling ethical behavior in all dealings by positioning the company as righteous, ethical, and unyielding to lawlessness, corruption, and exploitation.
- Working with society and governments to embrace the concept of value addition and its positive impact on their nations.

In 2011, I went 'all in' by selling everything in the USA and permanently moving my family to Africa. It served a two-fold purpose. The first purpose was to live and work alongside the population we are serving, which allows us to better understand their culture and adapt solutions to bring prosperity. The second purpose is that processing perishable crops at the source brings a competitive advantage of freshness and quality.

Our first company using the Sunshine Approach business model is the Sunshine Nut Company in Mozambique. We opened the factory in 2013 and within 2 years, we established ourselves in the finest retailers of the USA as the premium cashew brand due to the freshness, long shelf life, impeccable quality, and great taste of our product. For 6 years, we have sold in all 50 states. Now we are expanding to Europe, Asia, and Africa.

On the front of each package is the slogan "Hope Never Tasted So Good". How do we offer hope? We have instituted a Sunshine House program where we buy houses in the local communities and prepare them for a family. We then pair a widow or vulnerable woman as the caretaker together with 3 to 4 orphans to create a family. The concept has worked well since our first house was formed in 2014. When the Sunshine children go off to school during the day, the caretaker in each Sunshine House brings the neediest 12 – 15 children from the neighborhood for a day program which allows us to feed, educate, mend, and love on them.

While our roasting factory gives jobs to 50 people, we create the need for 1,000 Mozambicans to shell those cashews at factories up the road. Surrounding those shelling factories are 50,000 smallholder farmers whose harvests supply our factories. As we grow this business, the number of people impacted will grow exponentially.

The book of James in the Bible says: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" – James 1:27.

In prayer, God led me to His way of doing business. It keeps us from being polluted by the world, helps those least fortunate with employment, and looks after widows and orphans with its profits.

Jesus says in John 10:10: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly". I thank Jesus for calling me as Lord and leading me to a life of abundance.

That abundance does not flow from wealth, but from love, obedience, and surrendering to the plan that God had for my life.