

Don't Be Afraid Of Failure with Jana LaViolette

David Crabill: Welcome to the Forrager Podcast, where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today I am talking with Jana LaViolette.

[00:00:11] But first, are you building an email list for your business yet? If not, you really should be collecting customers email addresses and emailing them on a regular basis.

[00:00:22] Even these days, email continues to be better than social media for generating consistent sales and the best part is that you own it. Once you build an email list, nobody can take it away from you. I personally use ConvertKit to manage email for my fudge business and I created a free tutorial that will walk you through how to set up a free email marketing system for your business in less than one hour. So to learn more, you can go to forrager.com/email.

[00:00:51] Alright, so I have Jana LaViolette on the show today. Jana lives in Clovis, New Mexico and sells baked goods, candy, and now ice cream with her bakery, Nanna's Sweets. Jana's business journey is simply incredible and her path to success has not been easy.

[00:01:09] When she started selling baked goods back in 2014, her business did not take off like she hoped it would. But by persisting, listening to her community and pushing herself out of her comfort zone, she grew her cottage food bakery into a successful business over the next few years. Then in 2020, she took the next step and built a commercial kitchen on her property, then in 2021 she expanded her business with a food truck, and in 2022 transitioned into a brick and mortar storefront.

[00:01:39] Not only has her business grown substantially, but her business has helped Jana grow as a person as well. When she started the business, she was shy and introverted, but now she has over 18, 000 followers on Facebook. And she's done all of this while working a full time job. And being a parent of a special needs child.

[00:02:03] Jana's story is one of lots of trial and error, hard work, and never giving up. And with that, let's jump right into this episode.

[00:02:13] Welcome to the show, Jana. Nice to have you here.

[00:02:17] **Jana LaViolette:** Thank you for having me.

[00:02:19] **David Crabill:** So Jana, can you take us back to the beginning of this journey? How did it all get started?

[00:02:24] **Jana LaViolette:** Well, I guess I really got started because at the time I had adopted my son who was a teenager when he came to live with me. And so all of a sudden I went from being single and doing my own life to a kid who needed shoes and all these activities and sports, you know, and all this stuff that was out of his budget.

[00:02:43] And I'm like, all right, what am I gonna do to take on this responsibility and get this kid to things that he needed, you know, and vacations and all this extras that just come on with kids. So I've always wanted to bake

[00:02:54] so I started taking cake decorating classes, those basic Wilton classes at the local Michaels.

[00:03:00] And worked my way through those and I thought, you know, I think I could do something with this. So I started my little, cottage bakery and at the time we lived in Texas. started selling to friends and relatives and my co workers and they were, you know, Hey, you're pretty good at this.

[00:03:15] Maybe you should. Start doing this and so that kind of lit the fire and I realized I had a passion for it and it just kind of exploded from there.

[00:03:25] **David Crabill:** So can you give me a timeline here? Like, when did you adopt your son? And then, you know, when did you start baking? And then when did you start to sell?

[00:03:32] **Jana LaViolette:** I adopted him in 2014. He had just turned 13 years old the day he came to move with me and that's about the time I started taking the classes at Michael's. I did the cottage food in Texas for about a year And in July of 2014, we moved back to New Mexico which is where I was, I grew up and went to school and stuff. I went to work for a public university there, and when I got here, you know, I was just starting to get my feet wet in the cottage industry, and I thought do I want to do this again?

[00:04:06] You know, it's different state, different regulations, you know, and when I got to looking into it, you know, whoa, New Mexico was a lot more

strict in their stuff and your kitchen had to be inspected and it was a lot more restrictive than Texas. But at that point I just decided that I liked it and I wanted to continue it.

[00:04:23] And my kid was in choir and he wanted to go to choir camps, you know, and all these things and I'm just seeing dollar signs. So I was like, all right. So we found out what state regulations were, worked with the health department and stuff and kind of made that transition of getting certified as a cottage business in the state of Mexico.

[00:04:41] **David Crabill:** So I know that New Mexico used to have a pretty strict law. What was it actually like walking through that process of getting certified?

[00:04:50] **Jana LaViolette:** It was roadblocks. I mean, it really was. The city has one set of restrictions, and then the state had, you know, these guidelines, and so the biggest barrier to entry at that time was you had to have a separate hand washing sink in your kitchen. Well, if you've priced portable hand washing sinks with a heater in them, I mean, they can run a thousand dollars or more.

[00:05:14] so when we moved down here, the house that I bought, I purchased a house that needed work to it and we completely gutted it and remodeled it.

[00:05:22] And so at that point it was actually getting to remodel that kitchen is what made it easier to do that. there was only a handful of actually licensed, certified cottage food kitchens at the state at that time.

[00:05:35] I think I was one of like three people in the entire state.

[00:05:38] And so, for the first four years, I was a cottage business license. And then a little later, here came my husband that I met

[00:05:48] he's always been my biggest supporter and he was telling me, you know, maybe you ought to think bigger. And I'm like, well, what do you mean bigger? And he's like, well, why not go commercial? And so then, you know, everything changed from there. And we went from cottage to commercial.

[00:06:01] **David Crabill:** Yeah, fortunately things are easier in New Mexico now. I think it was in 2021 they passed a new improved law Um, I know you sold on the cottage food law for a few years and

[00:06:14] A little in a little bit, but can you just give a little snapshot of where you've kind of progressed from there?

[00:06:22] **Jana LaViolette:** So I started out at the farmer's market selling cupcakes um, and cookies. I had a folding table and a bright hot pink canopy. My dad had found online and had a banner printed and man, I thought I was like big time. And I went to my first farmer's market and it was an absolute bust. I had people come through and like, Oh my gosh, you want a dollar for a cookie? you know, it was very.

[00:06:50] Disappointing at the beginning to do all of this work to get licensed and this is the avenue you're going for. And then it wasn't a success, but I didn't let it stop me. I kept going back and I kept going back and I kept going back. And by the time that we got to the end of that first season, Things were starting to pick up.

[00:07:07] Things were starting to change. People would ask, Hey, do you have a card? I need a cake done. Do you do custom work type thing? And so that local avenue really changed things and opened it up for me.

[00:07:18] **David Crabill:** I came across a picture, I think maybe of your very first market or one of your first, and I was blown away by your pricing sheet. I mean, when you say a dollar for a muffin, you're not kidding. Um, Such low pricing, and it's really kind of surprising to hear that. It didn't go very well.

[00:07:37] So what kept you coming back to the market in those early days?

[00:07:41] **Jana LaViolette:** I think it was just passion and love for it. It was something that the more I got into it, the more I realized that it's what I wanted to do. And at that time, my mom and sister would come over and we would bake on Friday nights and we would package everything up. And um, my son enjoyed. Setting up on Saturdays with me and we would get our booth going and it kind of became this family activity that brought us all together. And so I think that's what kind of kept pushing me was I loved it. It brought our family together and you know, whether we had a good sell day or a bad sell day, was always a good day because we were together.

[00:08:19] **David Crabill:** So when you started and things didn't go well, how long did it take for you to turn the corner?

[00:08:26] **Jana LaViolette:** you know, that first year is difficult in any business, whether you're in a cottage food or, you know, just any business, it's

really easy to give up at that point. And so when those sells, when they didn't work and you're left with product on the table, you're like, there gets a point, you know, like you can only eat so many cookies and cupcakes at your house.

[00:08:44] You're kind of like. You know, sick of looking at it at a point. And so I started bundling stuff up and taking it to the realtors in town and letting people know, Hey, do you need a gift for a client that just sold a house? Here's some samples. Here's a business card. if we were at the Portales Farmer's Market, when we left there, we would drop them off with the thank you note at the fire department or the police department or the sheriff's department.

[00:09:07] my son's teacher at school, you know, let's take some and drop off into the teacher's lounge.

[00:09:12] And I would use that product as advertisement. And that's really when things started to change because it opened up all these people that didn't know who I was. And so the next week when I came back to Portales, the fire department would pull up in their fire truck and they're like, Hey, thanks for the cookies.

[00:09:28] We're here to buy this. And so when you come across those things that you think are stumbling blocks, you've just got to refocus on it and figure out how you can change it and how you can turn it around for the better. You know, there's a lot of people you give samples to that you'll never get anything back out of it, but you never know what you will get out of it when you do the things like that.

[00:09:47] **David Crabill:** So, like, when you are, in that spot, like many bakers are in the early days of not having the reception that you might have anticipated

[00:09:58] was it just like a feeling of being alone?

[00:10:00] Like, can you take me through what it felt like? At that time,

[00:10:04] **Jana LaViolette:** That feeling of alone was there. A lot of people in the community, they didn't understand cottage laws. They didn't understand the work that goes into it to get me to that point. And then when I got to that point and it wasn't working, it was just like, Oh, you know, what do I do?

[00:10:19] But I think a lot of it was stubbornness. When I start something, I'm going to finish it. Whether I fail or I succeed, I'm going to finish it. And so I just

grittled down and decided, all right, so we did strawberry cupcakes this week. It didn't sell. So is it the people buying it or is it my product?

[00:10:37] What else do I need to do? So next week, maybe we did banana nut. Oh man, banana nuts a hit on Saturday morning. people are coming through at the farmer's market. They've already got the coffee in their hand. It's early morning. So that banana nut muffin, that did great. it's a lot of figuring out what your clients want.

[00:10:55] What the population wants and catering to those needs. If you think that you can come in and, Oh, I'm the best chocolate chip cookie baker in the world. And that's the only thing that you focus on. You can make a successful business off of selling chocolate chip cookies, but you've got to learn to expand your horizons.

[00:11:12] And learn to change things when it's not working. You got to think on the fly. And you have to think quick because the market changes,

[00:11:21] When I first started, it was mainly just cookies and cakes. And at that time, the decorated cookie trend was picking up, and I just, I hated it. I absolutely hated it. It was time consuming. It made me focus. It was tedious and I just didn't want to do it. Just didn't want to do it. And so I kept getting requests.

[00:11:42] Can you do this? Can you do this? Can you do this? I'm like, Oh, I, Don't want to do that, but you have to run your business by that bottom line. When people are requesting decorated cookies and you're not selling anything else, well, then maybe you need to change your game up. So I started learning how to decorate cookies.

[00:11:58] And I have to say that learning to decorate cookies and that detail work, it took my cakes to another level because that piping experience, you know, it went across both mediums. And so I learned to do that because it was hot, it was popular, and so that's what I did.

[00:12:16] And there are some things that people will come, can you do this? and I will just be honest with them. That's not my skill set. That is not something I can do.

[00:12:23] But this is where networking comes in. I will tell people try this person. And since the cottage food laws have changed in New Mexico, it makes

those barriers for entry so much easier. And we have a lot of really good, talented women and men in our community.

[00:12:42] Now they're able to sell with the restrictions. Not as bad on the cottage food. And so in my shop now, I do have cards on my register. Could I make those items for them? Absolutely. Do I want to? Probably not, but

[00:12:56] I remember what it's like to be that cottage person and trying to get that out. So I do network in my community, and I do offer people, I'm sorry, I'm booked, I can't get it, but try this person,

[00:13:08] maybe you can find someone else that can, Get you in and get you on the schedule to get the product that you're wanting.

[00:13:13] **David Crabill:** With you kind of reaching out to the community, and you started to get more orders, or people coming back when you're giving free samples out, can you take me through the next few years of running your business as a cottage food operation? Like, what did that look like?

[00:13:31] **Jana LaViolette:** Uh, you know, those first few years, it was again, back to my son. I was trying to raise money to pay for his choir camp. We enjoy camping and traveling and our camper with our whole entire family, and we would have family reunions. So it's like, Oh, I need \$500, \$600 to, pay for this trip. And so those were my goals.

[00:13:49] My goals. Back then we were never to own a storefront. I mean, that I don't think was even in my thought processes five, six years ago. And then I met my husband he's now retired Air Force, then he was still active duty. Clovis is the home to Canon Air Force base. And so all of a sudden I have an avenue with our military families that I never had before.

[00:14:13] and so When we had those extras, he's taking them to his unit out at the base. And it's reaching a whole new avenue of clientele. And so I think that's when the next big process came in the business.

[00:14:28] the base has the equivalent of a mall. It's called the exchange.

[00:14:32] at the time I was doing candy bar bouquets at Valentine's day, because during that time of year, cookies and that seemed to sell really well. And so I got a kiosk out of the base. And they took a very small portion of your sales.

[00:14:47] So we did that the first year and we sold out in the first day. First day, everything was off the tables, and I was like, oh my gosh, I never expected that kind of response. And so that was Valentine's Day, and the exchange manager said, hey, what about coming back for Easter? And so I said, okay, so we came back for Easter, and this time I did Easter baskets and Easter cookies and stuff. And Kind of like the growing pains, I figured out pretty quick, nobody wanted the Easter baskets. So we had all of these Easter baskets, but the decorated cookies sold. Going back to having to learn, to make myself learn a new skill to offer the clients what they're wanting.

[00:15:26] So we did that and then Halloween came back out and they had us back out for Halloween and this time we just did Halloween cookies. Well, the problem was, One of the restaurants across from me there at the store, they were giving cookies away. So nobody wanted to pay for cookies when they were getting cookies for free, but I still handed out a lot of business cards and people would come through.

[00:15:50] Oh, I remember you. You were the lady that was here at Valentine's day. Are you going to be back this year? Do you have a card? I got a kid with a birthday coming up. Can you do a cake? So just because you sell something doesn't always mean that that event's a bust. It means that you are still networking and I'm still booking those orders for those future dates. and that's when my calendar started filling out. Um, I would be booked for the next, you know, few weeks out. So it was at that point that I realized, okay. I'm on to something here. Apparently something's working and my business model is working because my business is starting to grow.

[00:16:27] **David Crabill:** So you used the cottage food law to grow your business, and then at some point you decide to go commercial. So when did you know it was the right time to take that next step?

[00:16:37] **Jana LaViolette:** Um Our house very quickly got smaller when my husband moved in. And so we decided we needed a bigger house.

[00:16:45] we finally found one and

[00:16:47] bought the house in December. the business continued to grow. And then the inspector talked to me one day and my husband's like, do we need to do to be commercial?

[00:16:56] And it wasn't that much different than cottage. And so we had an extra space off of the house that was empty. We didn't use anything, out there. It had water. It had electricity. And so

[00:17:10] all we had to do was Put it in a three compartment sink, get separate refrigerator, another freezer, and

[00:17:16] a lot of the commercial stuff I would need for it I already owned and had been paid for because all of this time after we got married, I didn't take much out of the business.

[00:17:25] In fact, after my son graduated high school, everything stayed in the business. I put that money back into it and I know that's not always everyone's situation. But with my husband's job and now we had two incomes, I could. Reinvest that money back into growing the business. So in December of 2020, I believe we got our certification.

[00:17:48] And so now I am no longer cottage. I had a retail license from the state.

[00:17:53] And then the state came in and said, Oh, you know what? We're going to change the cottage laws. We want to make it easier for everybody.

[00:18:01] And so they redid all the laws on the books I think in the spring of that year

[00:18:06] and I was like, I just spent all this money investing to get a different license. And then now I really didn't, need it.

[00:18:15] **David Crabill:** So if the law had been different before you made that investment, Would that have changed where your business went and where do you think you'd be today if your cottage food law had been better?

[00:18:31] **Jana LaViolette:** I think I would have continued to work under the cottage food And if we had not done that, I don't think we would be in the storefront because it pushed me to the next level

[00:18:44] You really, in your business, you've got to be open to change and you've got to be open to growth. If something doesn't work, then.

[00:18:51] What's different? Did you change? Did your recipe change? Did your consumer change? Because we have that too, you know, being an Air

Force town we have deployments and people, PCS out of here. And so then a lot of my clients leave and now I have this huge unit of people coming in and they don't know who we are.

[00:19:11] So now I've got to rebrand myself to them.

[00:19:13] Our clientele right now is probably eighty percent military. And so they are constantly asking us hey, can you come out and do events and stuff? And I'm like well we can but New Mexico heat's no joke. And when it's summer and it's 105 and you're sitting on a flight line with cupcakes that are melting, then it's just, it's no fun. It's just absolutely miserable. And then nobody wants, you know, melted product. And so here goes my husband again. what's the next thing we need to do?

[00:19:43] And so my dad who, you know, going back to the days of this being a family thing would come in and help me set up my tent at the farmer's market, you know, and do all of that.

[00:19:52] And he said, well, let's build a food truck. And I'm like, y'all are absolutely insane. And my husband told me, he's like, hey, we can just... Make it a mobile unit. We're not actually baking. We're not actually cooking in here. We are just going to build out the interior, put in the hand washing sink, and so you have a place that you can roll in, sell your product, and we have the air conditioning.

[00:20:16] And I thought... Hmm. Well, okay. So, we went back to the health department and she said, absolutely, you can do that. You don't even need the hand washing sink.

[00:20:24] So, we started doing those events.

[00:20:27] Well, the first year, we had a huge, huge event here in Clovis called Draggin' Main. And so, there are people that come from all over the United States. If there's a classic car or some new car out there, it's going to be on the streets of Clovis during this week long festival. And so, we decided that We wanted to change.

[00:20:47] So what if we, instead of just putting product in here that was pre packaged, that we're just handing the client, well, what if we were doing fresh cookies? there's nothing like the smell of a warm chocolate chip cookie. So if that smell was going out the windows, you know, it might help draw people over here.

[00:21:04] So what do we need to do that? So here we go again, back to the health department and she says, Oh, well, we just, you know, we had to do a layout of the truck. What equipment do you need? We had to go back to the city. The fire marshal had to look at it to make sure, you know, are you frying? Do you need a vent hood?

[00:21:20] What are the things that you will be doing? And then we can, you know, kind of go from there. So we bought a. 16 foot enclosed trailer.

[00:21:29] we ordered a serving window off of eBay,

[00:21:33] we painted the inside bright pink so that when you walk up, there's just this pink backdrop behind you when you're ordering your food and stuff. And at the time, I just couldn't decide what I wanted on the wrap.

[00:21:45] So I started looking on Etsy and found a graphic that I just really, really liked.

[00:21:51] And she's got a, a mixing bowl and, and stuff, but she was blonde and she was kind of skinny. And so I went back to the creator on that store, the owner of the store and asked her, I'm like, Alright, I really love this graphic, but I don't have blonde hair and I'm kind of short and a little chunky.

[00:22:09] So can you change this? And she was like, Oh my gosh, I would love to. And so she made it look more like me. And so this became the face of Nanna's Sweets. So we had it put on the side of the truck and then all along the front of it, there are cutouts of cookies and mixing bowls and just all kinds of, you know, baking related stuff.

[00:22:31] And so it took us probably working on the weekends about a month. We got it done.

[00:22:35] And we went back to the city. They looked at it. We went back to the state. They approved everything. And so within two months of doing the food truck, we were a certified commercial food truck. We had the hand washing sinks.

[00:22:50] We were good to go. We could bake. And so we started right as that happened in June, that was Draggin' Main. And so we decided that we were going to do this, you know, and you think in your head, Oh man, we're going to kill it. You know, this time we're going to bake those cookies. They're going to be fresh.

[00:23:06] We're going to have lines of people. And yeah, it's kind of like the farmer's market when I first started. That's really not what happened. So we're like, all right, what are we doing wrong here? The thing was, everybody was like, it was hot. Going back to New Mexico heat. And they're like, Oh, I don't know if I want a warm cookie.

[00:23:23] You got any ice cream? Can you put ice cream in that? And I was like uh, we're not an ice cream truck. We're a bakery truck. And so, I mean, we sold it wasn't a complete loss.

[00:23:33] But at the time uh, one of the trends on, TikTok and Instagram was cake cones. You would see these cobbler cones that were in these waffle cones and they had all this stuff.

[00:23:42] And so We thought, okay, we're doing the fair next month. Maybe that would kind of be our niche item. And so we did waffle cake cones and I made cake, you know, fresh in sheets and we cut them in these little bitty cubes and we would layer it with butter cream and at the time we weren't. So I just went to Walmart and we bought tubs of, bluebell and stuff and we would do a scoop on it and we put ice cream on the top and they sold pretty well at the fair.

[00:24:08] But It wasn't a knockout seller. Like we thought it was going to be.

[00:24:12] And so, we're like, hmm, well, that didn't work.

[00:24:16] Um, the fair was super expensive entry price to get in it. By the time we paid the girls, like, I don't even know that I broke even. And so I thought, okay, this didn't work, But again, everybody's asking for ice cream. So I thought, okay, maybe we need to do the ice cream. And we didn't at that point, we kept just sticking to me going to Walmart, and going with that.

[00:24:39] And so the next summer comes around and people are still asking for ice cream. And so that's when we kind of got thinking, all right, do we want to add ice cream? I mean, again, it's not cookies, it's not cottage food baking, but that is what customers was asking for. We did not have an ice cream shop in our community.

[00:24:57] You've got, you know, McDonald's, you can get a McFlurry or a Frosty from Wendy's, but we didn't actually have an ice cream shop. So that was something that was always in the back of our minds of maybe that's something we need to expand to.

[00:25:09] So kind of backtracking a little bit, February of 2022 we were doing the cells at the base again. And at that point in February, Our house completely just explodes red, white, and pink. As soon as Christmas is over, I was starting bouquets and I had customers that were custom ordering stuff in January.

[00:25:31] And I mean, just every open space in our house had bouquets in it. And my husband finally said, all right, something else has got to change. He said, I think maybe we need to rent something, Because we couldn't even handle the deliveries at that point. It took my mom, my dad, you know, my sister, my husband, and we did deliveries for three, four days around Valentine's Day. And we still, we couldn't keep up with the demand. And so we thought about, renting a space just for Valentine's Day. And so the junior high that I went to school with right across the street from that when I went to school there, there used to be a little bakery there. And I'm driving down main street and I look over and there's a for rent sign in it.

[00:26:10] And I'm thinking, well, all right. So I called the number on the sign and the gentleman, Mr. Jim he lives in Farwell, the next little town over. He said, I can be there. And, you know, 20, 30 minutes. You want to wait? Sure. And so he gets up here and I thought, this guy is going to let me do a one month lease.

[00:26:27] I mean, cause we didn't need anything long term. We just needed something to get us through Valentine's Day. And so he meets me up here and we see the spot and we've looked at several spots in town and what he was asking in the square footage that it was, we're like, man, this is great. And so, you know, my aunt, who's a realtor, was with me.

[00:26:44] She's standing behind him, you know, shaking her head like, take it. And so I told him, I was like, all right, well, do you need me to sign a lease? You know, what exactly do you need for me? And he shook my hand and said, well, if I can't trust your handshake, then I can't trust you. And here's the keys. And I'm kind of standing there, just kind of dumbfounded.

[00:27:03] This guy had this kind Trust, and just giving the keys to the building to, you know, a random stranger. So I um, picked the keys and then went out, took dinner to my husband that night and just, you know, nonchalantly threw in the conversation. Oh, by the way, I rented a storefront today. And he was like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

[00:27:22] Go back, you did what today? And so, I think at that point, that was one time that maybe he pushed the brakes because we hadn't discussed it. of the

parts of running a business and having a spouse involved is clear communications. And so we really work together. He's always been my sounding board.

[00:27:41] And you know, he's an engineering techie guy. And so he's really good about filling those gaps and kind of thinking of things that I don't. And so when I told him I rented a store, he was like, what? And I'm like, it's just for the month. He gave us a one month lease. We're just going to use it. I can do the bouquets up there, you know? And so he was like, all right, if you think it's, it's great and you can swing the rent, then great. And so kind of in the back of my head, I knew I wasn't going to leave. I knew this was going to be the spot we were going to be in.

[00:28:10] And so we had a little ribbon cutting with the chamber and they're like, Hey, this is, you know, we've got a little retail space. And we killed it. I mean, we killed it on Valentine's day. We had people coming into the community that were so excited. Customers that I hadn't seen, you know, maybe in a few years, customers that came from towns over, I had customers come from out of state for our ribbon cutting and it was humbling and overwhelming that.

[00:28:38] There was that many people that had followed my story over the year that still followed my story that came out to support me. And so we got into our storefront. And we stayed here

[00:28:50] **David Crabill:** so initially you were looking for a space just for a month, but you decided to stay. So what were those first few months in the store like?

[00:29:01] **Jana LaViolette:** those first few months were hard and I mean, they were hard. February was great because of Valentine's Day, but then, you know, we had this lag and we were coming in and I'm like, all right, you know, I was still working full time.

[00:29:15] You know, I wasn't at the point where I could, I do it seven days a week. It was just a weekend type thing. And I believe at that time we were only open on Saturdays. And it was like, all right, just being real with myself, maybe this isn't going to work. That's when I thought, okay, if this is going to work and this is what we want to do, what do I got to do? What have I got to change to make this work? And so we just asked our clients, what would you like to see? And a lot of people said, it's Friday night, it's after a long week, we want to go eat dinner.

[00:29:44] There's no place to go get dessert in town. Can you be open a few hours for, date night for me and my husband or for us to come have, snack as a family. And so we thought, okay, I can do Friday nights. So we added Friday nights and then sales kind of still continued to grow, but it wasn't what we wanted it.

[00:30:02] And so that thought of the ice cream still always was in the back of my head. And so we were always, even here at the store, people would come in, Oh, you don't have any ice cream. You don't have any ice cream. We're like, no, we have cookies. We have cupcakes. You know, we have fudge. We have all these other things.

[00:30:17] We don't have ice cream. So we started looking for an ice cream vendor. It's like, all right, if we need to sell ice cream to make this work, then what do we got to do? And so I reached out to Southwest Ice Cream out of Albuquerque, which is about three and a half hours from here. And they said, Hey, well, we do a lease with you.

[00:30:35] We let you use our freezers no strings attached. All you have to do is buy our ice cream. And I was like, Whoa, I don't have to invest in equipment and we can just add it to the shop. Well, why wouldn't you do that? So we added ice cream that summer. Or that spring. And so we came back to Draggin' Main the next June.

[00:30:53] Now we have ice cream. And we did so much better. And so we were taking our fresh baked cookies and putting their favorite ice cream. We would have anywhere between eight to twelve flavors and um, doing the cake cones. And you know, this is our cake and you can pick which of your favorite ice cream you want on it.

[00:31:12] And ice cream kind of started taking over. And I, Don't really say it took over the business. It was more, it was complementing the product that we were already doing. So Best of Clovis Awards came around in July of that year. We had only been doing ice cream for, you know, a month or two, and we got an award for Best Ice Cream in Clovis.

[00:31:33] Now, to be fair, like I said, there wasn't an ice cream shop in town besides Dairy Queen or McDonald's, you know, or Sonic or something, but it meant that people were recognizing our brand in the community. And so we did really well. I think That year at Draggin' Main, we did like 2, 500 that day that Saturday, which was pretty phenomenal to me.

[00:31:54] I mean, like, we were just trying this out and it seemed to be very successful. so this year for Draggin' Main, I think we did a little over 6, 000 that day. And the funny part was, is our second year around, it wasn't so much the ice cream, it wasn't so much the fresh cookies that we're making, it was people were constantly asking for something to drink because it's 105 outside and they're on the blacktop in the brick streets on main and it's hot. And so, this year, we listened to feedback and we added lemonade.

[00:32:25] We sold more tea and lemonade out of that food truck than I ever thought was possible. We went out, ordered just one case of cups, and we went through every cup and lid. My husband had to go down and buy more and we would just tell people, I'm sorry, we don't have lids, but, and they didn't care. So we sold ice cream, lemonade and cookies and cakes and that kind of stuff.

[00:32:44] And now here in the shop, we have had a fantastic summer, and people, they're, it's hot, and they're Googling ice cream near me, and so Pops Nana Sweets, and so they come in, and then they see our bakery cases, and like, oh man, I didn't know you did cakes. Can I get a cookie? Um, You know, Snickerdoodle Blondies are our number one seller in the shop, and funny story behind it is, When I was going through some culinary arts courses, that was one of the recipes I developed.

[00:33:11] And for the first year, nobody would buy it. Nobody wanted it. Nobody wanted to taste it. We tried giving samples away. Like, just nobody had any interest. And my gut told me this is a good product. this is gonna sell. And so we just hung in there on that one and now it's our number one seller. And so we take that snickerdoodle blondie and now we pair it with warm apples, vanilla ice cream, caramel on the top, whipped cream, all that kind of stuff.

[00:33:38] And it just flies out the door. People love it. We take our brownies, which were always a good seller when we were at events, but now we sell brownie Sundays with it. Um, We use the different cookies to make cookie sandwiches. So it's more about complementing. It's not just bakery. It's not just ice cream. We listen to the demand and what our customers were asking for, and it was desserts in general. And so that's how we kind of got into the ice cream game. Um, May of this year, we're now on DoorDash and we are DoorDashing ice cream, which is just crazy for people to, to buy ice cream on DoorDash, but it took research.

[00:34:19] What's the best packaging? What keeps it from melting so quickly? How do we get it in the hands of the driver and the driver to get it quickly to the customer and you know, we have not had one complaint about bad product

about it melting Um, it's always funny that we were tagged in a post on one of the base spouses group here the other day and she was just raving at, you know, this banana split that she got that was delivered to her that the ice cream wasn't melting.

[00:34:45] And people were like, whoa, you bought ice cream on DoorDash? Did you lose your mind? And she's like, no, it was fantastic, And so the next weekend, man, I think my husband had to make three runs for bananas. Word got out and then all we sold that weekend was banana splits. I mean, it's just kind of a wild ride of how one thing builds to another and then your business just continues to grow.

[00:35:09] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean that is a fascinating evolution of your business and it seems like one thing that ties your whole story together is you're unafraid to try new things and to kind of push the limits of your comfort zone.

[00:35:24] **Jana LaViolette:** You know, that, that is something when my husband and I first met and got married, The joke is that I didn't talk for the first two years we were married. I, I don't know that I spoke very much on our first date. I was a shy person and I just wasn't very outgoing. Uh, I've been that way my whole life.

[00:35:43] And so when I get into my own business, it's amazing that when you find something that you're passionate about, that is yours, that your babying and nurturing and growing how it changes you. I am not um, so shy anymore. No, I am, you put me in a room full of people I don't know. And I tend to, you know, clam up.

[00:36:03] But when it comes to my business, you know, we, we greet every person that comes through there. And we focus on building that customer service relationship. I learned to work my customer's names. I may not know your name, but I know your face. I know your kids, you know. And we build that relationship with those customers.

[00:36:21] And I think that's what's helped this business thrive so much is me getting out of my comfort zone pushing myself to try those new things and to expand my horizons.

[00:36:33] **David Crabill:** Wow, to hear that you were an introvert and shy is quite surprising to me because I can see that you have now over 18, 000 followers on your personal Facebook page and you post about yourself a lot and

are very open. So can you just talk a little bit more about that transition and what got you to be so open online.

[00:36:58] **Jana LaViolette:** It just came out of the blue. about a year ago I think I had made my first video. We could go back and look. It's been about a year and didn't know a lot about that marketing. And so how do I get into expanding those horizons? And so one of my friends that I work with has a marketing company.

[00:37:16] so she started explaining stuff to me and literally had to sit down and show me, okay, this is how you make a reel. This is how you publish it. At the time, Instagram, never posted to it. The only reason there was an Instagram account was because on your business Facebook page, it automatically, you know, posts over to it.

[00:37:34] And so I started making videos. I think at the beginning, to be honest, it was just friends and personal family. I mean, I didn't have any followers, you know? And so one day I made a shark cookie video because it was shark week And so I was like, Oh, so I just made a video of me.

[00:37:52] Making this cookie and airbrushing it and, putting a little shark on the cookie. And I put the theme song to Jaws on it and I hit publish. about 20 minutes later, my phone's ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. And I'm like, what is going on on my phone? You know? And it went viral. I mean viral in like five minutes.

[00:38:10] I had something like several thousand views and people commenting on it. And so I had to call Kaylee and I was like, how do I turn this off? You know, how do I mute this? Because my phone was just blowing up and that's kind of what started it. I'm like, all right. Why are they wanting to watch me?

[00:38:27] I didn't think it was that great of a video, but it just kind of thought, okay, I can do this. This is another way to brand my business. so I continued making, you know, little videos and then it never really had much traction after that. It was kind of like a hit or miss. And I remember that's one thing she told me.

[00:38:44] you can try the perfect song. You can try the perfect format, you know, the perfect audio that you're mouthing something to, and It's just luck. If it gets picked up and it goes viral, it's just flat out luck. And so I kept thinking, all right, I'm luckier than this. I can do it. And so I continue to make videos and, you know, I'd get some in the thousands or, you know, here and there.

[00:39:05] And so I was doing another cake for a client and it was a numbers cake. Her daughter was turning 12. And so I did this video on me cutting out the numbers and torting the cake and. Decorating it with all of her favorite things and uh, put it to a Michael Jackson song. And the next thing I know it was in the millions.

[00:39:25] I was getting millions of views. And I'm just like, who in this world is watching my videos that I'm making in my teeny tiny little bakery in Eastern New Mexico? Like nobody even knows who I am, where Clovis is. And all of a sudden I am getting all these followers. And it just kind of exploded from there.

[00:39:42] And I kept getting people and kept getting followers. And then I started getting invitations from Meta. And they said, Hey, we want to pay you for your content. And I'm like, whatever. You know, I think I'll laugh, you know, kind of like when I got your email saying you wanted to interview me. I checked the email address and I'm like, this isn't real.

[00:40:01] This isn't real. They don't want to interview me. So, I just kept hitting no on it, and then one day, I'm thinking, eh, why not, you know? So, I looked at it, and they, they wanted your W 9, and kind of went through the process, and I thought, if I get a little bit, you know, from it, then why not? And so the first month or two, I think the first month I ended up at like 4.

[00:40:23] 56 on getting paid on that deal, and you have to make at least 25 before they'll cut you a check, and so we would laugh and say me and my husband that, you know, maybe by the time next year, we can afford to go eat, you know, dinner at McDonald's or, you know, make a really extreme and go to Chili's or something.

[00:40:40] But, you know, it was just kind of a joke that, you know, we weren't getting anything off of this. And then I did another cake video and all of a sudden that payment calculator kept going up and kept going up and kept going up. The check I got my second month was for over 1, 600. And at that point I was like, holy cow, like it was insane.

[00:41:01] You know, that that video could do that kind of money. that one is still going. I think that video has over, it's right at 20 million views and it just keeps going up. I got my report this month. It had another 1. 5 million views this month. and so. I do have a little bit of a quirky personality and so I would start seeing these funny videos and I'm like, Oh, I can do that.

[00:41:24] And so I started making some of these funny videos and now I have people emailing me or message me or making comments like, Oh my gosh, you're so funny. Or a lot of the people that, you know, I work with and friends in town, I hear all the time, Oh my gosh, your videos are great. I love watching it. I love, you know, your funny ones, you know.

[00:41:44] Stuff like that. And the job I'm in now, I'm actually a food service director for the church that I attend. And so we feed about 14 meals a year to the community and to our church body. I work there and then I work here at the shop on the weekends and there have been a lot of people up there that have, Just make comments about it.

[00:42:05] And so I actually cook, cook during the week and, you know, do the bakery here on the weekend. And so someone told me, Hey, you ought to do like a cooking video. Cause I was always sharing my recipes at the church with people. They're like, Oh man, that was really good. Can I get the recipe for that? So now we've, we've started the try it Tuesday, you know, deal where you can tag me in a recipe and send it to me and I try it for you. So, if you look at my Facebook or Instagram you may think this lady's not Cottage food. She's got ice cream. She's got funny videos. She's cooking steak this week. I mean, it seems I'm kind of all over the board, but going back with going with the flow and where kind of life takes you, that's just where we have ended up.

[00:42:47] And it's just kind of mind boggling to think that there are people that. Think I'm funny or that like to watch me make cakes, it's pretty humbling and it's pretty exciting at the same time.

[00:42:58] **David Crabill:** Yeah, I mean having seen some of your videos you definitely have that quirky personality and I could see why you are well liked online but one thing that is really crazy about the Viral videos that got millions of views is there's nothing in there that I can see that would have made it viral I mean, it's just a A video of you, you know, creating a cake and decorating it.

[00:43:21] I mean, like it's just totally random, right? Like, did you have any sense that that was going to work?

[00:43:26] **Jana LaViolette:** No, I, you know, I didn't. And like going back to what Kaylee said, it's just luck, you know, and I've tried going back. The only pattern I have kind of figured out on the videos that do really well, that get up in the millions, And I guess maybe because it's a hot trend, you know, and if you go to your analytics and people are searching for that, then, you know, maybe that's why those particular videos are more popular.

[00:43:52] But I guarantee you, I can make another cake. On a numbers cake video tomorrow and it may get 200 views. And then, you know, I did one this last week on funny things people say coming into the shop and I thought it was great. And I'm like, Oh man, this one's going to take off. And it really didn't get any views.

[00:44:11] So there is no rhyme or reason, you know, with it. I, I think just social media like that is luck because like you said, there wasn't anything special about those videos. It was just. Me making a cake. There wasn't anything special about that shark cookie. It was just, it was shark week and it hit at the right moment and, you know, it just kind of took off.

[00:44:33] **David Crabill:** And now in terms of monetizing this, is that something that you actually have to get the invitation from Meta to do, or was it something you could have proactively done? As soon as you started gaining a lot of traction.

[00:44:46] **Jana LaViolette:** No, it is by invitation only. There are metrics that you have to reach. You have to have more than 5,000 followers. You have to have videos with certain amounts of views. I don't remember the exact numbers but you do have to be invited to, to do that. So when I did get that invitation, it was, you know, you get so much stuff online and you're like, is this real?

[00:45:08] Is it not real? And I thought, eh. It's probably not going to pay for itself, but, you know, I'm kind of glad I did it because it has opened up the business to a new avenue of people, you know, and I have a lot of people to say, Oh, we're coming through Clovis. You know, we do travel, we live in California, but we come through there.

[00:45:27] We're going to stop at your shop when we're in town. So I mean, you just never know the things that you do that are going to change your business and how it's going to impact it.

[00:45:36] **David Crabill:** Now, what you have done over the last nine years is just phenomenal in terms of growing it, from a pretty substantial cottage food business to now, you know, a substantial mobile food business to now a substantial storefront. And all this time, you said you have. Been working at another job, right? This has just been a side thing for you?

[00:46:00] **Jana LaViolette:** It is, I literally work seven days a week. I am at the church Sunday through Wednesday, Thursday is technically my day off, but not my day off. You know, this morning I got up and I'm doing the marketing

and posting menus on Facebook and setting the work schedules for the girls. And, you know, I've got an interview with you today.

[00:46:20] And as soon as we're done with this, you know, I have to grocery shop and I have to start baking this evening and get stuff ready because we're opening up, you know, the store tomorrow. But, you know, there's a difference between work and working and doing something you love. And I love working in the shops, so, yes, it does get tiring at times. We're at that point where I've got two girls working for me and last week, one of them were gone while they were both gone last week. And my husband and I were like, eh, we got this, first year. It was just us. We got this. And let me tell you. We closed the door Saturday and I wanted to literally collapse on the floor just from sheer exhaustion.

[00:46:59] And I thought, if I get down there, I'm not getting back up. So I didn't. And we cleaned up and got out of here and I went home and, you know, crashed and got up the next morning and, you know, did it all over again. But I'm hoping within the next year the deal has always been, I cannot quit my full time job until it can replace our income.

[00:47:18] Because hobbies are great, but you still have to pay the mortgage. You still have to make your car payment. I have a payment on the food truck. I still have, you know, responsibilities that you have to take care of. So we're at the point now that by next year we should be able to do that.

[00:47:35] Um, I'm actually in a public loan forgiveness program. That's why I moved back to New Mexico. So um, if you work 10 years in a public.

[00:47:50] You still have to make your student loan payments and you have to put in your 10 years of service, but at the end of that 10 years, they forgive the balance on your student loans. And so, July 1 started my ninth year. And so, I have 11 months left to where for the first time in the last Well, you know, 10 years that I started this journey, being able to quit my nine to five job is going to be a reality.

[00:48:17] we haven't quite figured out, you know, I'm constantly thinking about it. It's constantly in the back of my mind. But when you leave those. you lose insurance, you lose retirement, I'm not a spring chicken, you know, I'm 45, so I am thinking less about, younger days and now I'm thinking about retirement, you know, what do you, what if this doesn't work, what if I full time and, you know, walk away from those type things, you know but then the other part of me says, you know what, if it fails, then you go back to way it was before.

[00:48:49] You know, our business model is working great now. So we continue to work on the weekends. You get up, you dust yourself off and you continue doing what makes you happy. And, you know, this is just one of those things that truly makes me happy and it makes it worth the work. I, I love what I do at the church getting to minister to our community and feed people.

[00:49:09] And I love when the customers come into my shop and I get to feed them here because, I mean, let's be honest, sugar makes everybody happy. And nobody, you know, can cry with ice cream in their hands. So my shop's always a happy place. And it's something that I really see myself doing for, you know, years to come. maybe this is my retirement.

[00:49:29] **David Crabill:** It makes sense that you haven't, moved it to being a full time thing yet But do you think your inability to do that has held back your business?

[00:49:41] **Jana LaViolette:** It has, I do have to say, when we opened the store and we were kind of deciding, this was a trial period. It was like a test. Like, it gave me an opportunity to try things and, okay, would this work with a safety net, if that makes sense. If I'd have done this and just decided, I mean, there's people that say, I'm quitting my job and they food truck full time.

[00:50:03] And I just can't even imagine. Just making that kind of leap of faith. So this one's kind of been a stepping stone and my whole business has kind of been a stepping stone from one to the other.

[00:50:15] So we are at that point now from going from cottage to our license at the house, to the food truck, to the store, to now we are in need of a bigger space

[00:50:25] the store that we're in right now, we are busting at the seams. If you come in on a Saturday evening from six to eight, that's our busy time when people have gone to dinner and they're coming in for dessert. A lot of times there's not a place to sit.

[00:50:39] When we do poffertjes, which are mini Dutch pancakes, that weekend, a lot of times there are people standing out in the parking lot waiting on their stuff and we have to take their stuff to them because there's no place to fit in here.

[00:50:51] um, electrical wise, I have to unplug my waffle iron.

[00:50:55] To plug in the poffertje grill. We can't add a bigger cabinet to offer more ice cream flavors because we're out of outlets, you know? And we keep pushing and pushing back the little divider wall where we have our supplies and stuff to add more seating. And, you know, there's just, we've outgrown this building.

[00:51:13] So we're currently looking to either A buy the building. And to be able to expand into the shop next to us so that we can have a commercial kitchen on one side and then have, you know, the retail space and, you know, the tables and everything on this side or, you know, looking for another location being in a small town, there's just not a lot of opportunities for

[00:51:39] restaurants, because to get into that level of restaurant, you've got to have a grease trap. And that's kind of been our stumbling block here is we're licensed as a snack bar with the environment department, because everything we do is pretty much disposable. We bake and do all that kind of stuff out of the food truck.

[00:51:58] And then we bring it into the store and we, you know, sell it out of the case. But to be able to. Take it to the next level. I need a 40, 000 grease trap and I Am not going to put 40, 000 into something like that on a place that I'm renting for months a month that I don't own So we are currently looking for that Next growth opportunity.

[00:52:19] So I think by this time next summer, the game will be completely different and I am hoping that we will be operating on that full scale commercial retail platform.

[00:52:30] **David Crabill:** I saw a post back when you opened the mobile bakery and you said that you were making this transition and you had plans to open a storefront in three years. Lo and behold, one year later you opened a storefront. How has the business surprised you over the last decade?

[00:52:50] **Jana LaViolette:** You know, it's just surprising really isn't the right word for it. I remember being a little girl, second, third, fourth grade, being in my grandparents kitchens and watching him make buttercream roses I mean, it was just like magic to me when I was a little girl. And so, you know, kind of along the time, I don't know, probably what is it? The early 2000s, Cake Boss and, you know, Duff came out and, you know, you got more attention on what was the bakery life and what were these things? And in the back of my head, I'm being like, man, that would be awesome.

[00:53:22] You know what I mean? It was just, it was just this little dream, but you know, sometimes. Practicality in life kind of reigns you back in. It's like, Oh, you can't do that.

[00:53:32] But you know, things just evolved. And if you have the willingness to change and learn and re educate yourself on the things that you are good at, the things you aren't good at, then you can do it.

[00:53:46] I mean, it's those little dreams in the back of your mind can become reality if you put the effort into it.

[00:53:53] **David Crabill:** So What's the end game for you? Like, when are you going to feel like you're at a good place with your business?

[00:54:02] **Jana LaViolette:** Our, both of our children are special needs. My son, when I was adopted him he was a special needs child. My stepdaughter is also, and so part of this dream has always been giving them an opportunity to learn a job and to learn a skill set and to give them that sense of worth that they are doing something.

[00:54:24] So when we built the food truck my daughter came down and worked with us. And when she came in, she's autistic and so she has trouble, you know, dealing with people one-to-one um, and communicating. And so she was very, very, very adamant. She did not want to do anything except for hand the order to the customer at the window.

[00:54:45] And we were great with that. I mean, if that's what she wants to do, that's what we're gonna go with. And so she was with us for a month that summer and. By the end of that four weeks, she was making cookie sandwiches and had learned how to swirl buttercream and packaging. And so to see her grow in that one month it was just amazing.

[00:55:08] at that point, it wasn't about us. It wasn't about my husband at the register. It wasn't about my name being on the food truck. It was about. Growing as a person and realizing that she can learn a skill and contribute. And my son was the same way with helping us at the farmers markets and taking the cash and learning to do that and helping set up the tent.

[00:55:28] now he lives in Albuquerque and he doesn't live here. So he's not as involved in it. Um, Read an article in the newspaper years ago about a special hearts bakery.

[00:55:39] And it was giving kids with disabilities and special needs jobs, and that's kind of always been in the back of my brain. So I adopted my son. My sister and her husband had adopted five kids. Two of those are special needs. When my husband and I met, part of what brought us together was, hey. I have a special needs kids too and we kind of bonded over that and so it has become part of our business model and I hope that it continues to be that way.

[00:56:07] My niece graduated this May and she is working in the shop with us and she hands the orders out to the customers and clears the table and she's learning to work the waffle cone maker and so you know we're teaching those kids. That they can be independent adults and they can learn these things. And we are trying to share that with them in the community.

[00:56:28] And I have to say the customers are great when they come in, they just treat them as equals because when they're in the shop, that's exactly what they are. And we just love on them and try to give them a place in our community and in our, Business here.

[00:56:43] **David Crabill:** It seems like, across your entire journey. This has always been like bigger than yourself. It's always been for family or it's been for the community or it's been for others. Is that what you think has helped you be so successful?

[00:56:59] **Jana LaViolette:** I think it has, because through that journey, there's been so many times that uh, you know, especially with working two jobs, there are just some days it's just like, what are you doing? I am exhausted. You know, I, this last week we fed all of the school employees and the teachers in the community for convocation,

[00:57:18] so I fed 760 people in under an hour. So when I got done there, let me tell you, I was wiped out. And then I had to come open the shop. And it was just one of those moments that I'm exhausted, you know, what am I doing? And then I see the customers come in, you know, we have the ambulance pull up with all of the firefighters that come in and they have smiles on their face and, Hey, what are y'all going to make us today?

[00:57:44] And it just kind of makes that weariness go away and you just realize that this is why you're doing it, Those little things go a long ways. When you're trying to develop your business and it's what keeps me going.

[00:57:57] It's what keeps me pushing day to day.

[00:57:58] **David Crabill:** So, considering everything you've gone through with your cottage food business and now your commercial business. What's the advice that you give to somebody when they are starting out?

[00:58:10] **Jana LaViolette:** Don't be afraid. don't be afraid of failure because you know what? Let's be really honest. You're gonna fail. You're gonna fail. Those first years or those first six months or you know, you trying to get things off of the ground, it's gonna fail. And that's where you have to learn to adapt. It changed.

[00:58:30] Okay, why did it fail? And you have to be

[00:58:33] honest with what are your strengths and what are your weaknesses?

[00:58:38] what are you going to do about your weaknesses and what are you going to do to make your strengths even better, to make yourself shine?

[00:58:44] **David Crabill:** Well, Jana, thank you so much for sharing all that amazing advice. And if somebody is interested in learning more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:56] **Jana LaViolette:** We do have a website at nannassweets.com. You can find me on Facebook under my name uh, Jana LaViolette, or you can find me under Nanna's Sweets on Facebook. And I am also um, on Instagram.

[00:59:11] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today.

[00:59:15] **Jana LaViolette:** Thank you for having me.

[00:59:16] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

[00:59:21] For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/96.

[00:59:28] And if you're enjoying this podcast, please take a quick moment right now and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. It doesn't have to be a long review, but it's truly the best way to support this show and help others like you find this podcast.

[00:59:40] And finally, if you're thinking about selling your own homemade food, check out my free mini course where I walk you through the steps you need to take to get a cottage food business off the ground. To get the course, go to cottagefoodcourse.com.

[00:59:51] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.