

ELEVATING THE BUSINESS OF PIZZA

PMQ Pizza

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Hero of the Story

Scott Van Duzer's Read to Succeed program PAGE 16
is changing kids' lives—and packing the house on Wednesdays—at Big Apple Pizza. And he wants to help you do it, too.

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HERO OF THE STORY

Scott Van Duzer is the “good guy” in a plot to get free books into kids’ hands—and fill Big Apple Pizza’s seats on slow nights. Now he wants to help other owners write the next chapter.

BY RICK HYNUM | PHOTOS COURTESY BIG APPLE PIZZA

Scott Van Duzer, owner of Big Apple Pizza in Port St. Lucie, Florida, looks like an ex-Marine—the kind of stout, strong, can-do hero who would dash across a hellish battlefield, dodging bombs and bullets, to carry an injured comrade to safety. But he’ll be the first to tell you: He’s a pizza man, not a soldier. Big Apple has been his life, in fact, since he was 16 years old. But what a life it’s been.

SEVIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Scott Van Duzer cares deeply about kids, in part because he has children and grandchildren of his own, including daughter Brooke, age 10, and granddaughter Abigail, age six.





Scholastic has donated a total of 20,000 books in two years to the Read to Succeed program, and kids can claim them as their own with a visit to Big Apple Pizza.



Free books on Wednesday nights turn local kids and parents into regular Big Apple Pizza customers.

The towering, barrel-chested restaurateur, now 59, famously lifted Barack Obama off his feet with a bear hug when the then-president visited Big Apple Pizza in 2012. (“You are, like, the biggest pizza shop owner I’ve ever seen!” Obama exclaimed.) He was invited to sit next to First Lady Michelle Obama at the final presidential debate of the 2012 campaign. Three other U.S. presidents—from both parties, mind you—have recognized Van Duzer for his service and dedication to the town he loves. Plus he makes “really good frigg’in’ pizza.”

And while he’s not ex-military, Van Duzer has doubtlessly saved thousands of lives with his restaurant’s “Be a Hero” blood drives (more than 7,000 people have

donated blood in the past 10 years). Moreover, when anyone in his community needs help—money to pay their medical bills, cover funeral costs or rebuild after a house fire—it’s Van Duzer to the rescue, through his Van Duzer Foundation. To people in St. Lucie County and the entire region, he really is a hero.

Now Van Duzer has another mission: getting free books into children’s hands to improve reading scores at local schools and boost literacy. His Read to Succeed program, in its third year, has had a transformative effect on the county and his business—turning Big Apple’s traditionally slow Wednesday nights into blockbusters.

And Van Duzer wants to share the program with the pizza community

nationwide. If he can do it in Port St. Lucie, he says, you can do it, too. “It has changed my business. We’ve been here a long time, but I’d never done the volume of business that I now do with the schools....I pinch myself sometimes. How do you distinguish yourself from another pizzeria or hamburger or hot dog restaurant? This is it.”

A LIFE OF SERVICE

From his childhood on, Van Duzer’s mother taught him to help others, in part because she needed help at times, too, and knew how it felt. “We didn’t have much growing up,” he says. “We’re working people, and my mom was a rock. She would go without to make sure that I had, like, a glove to play baseball with. ‘If you have the means to help someone, you should help them, because you never know when you might need help.’ She always told me that when I was young.”

Van Duzer started out washing dishes at Big Apple Pizza, then became its owner in his early 20s. Around 1997, he launched a wildly successful school lunch program that generated notable profits, while also endearing himself to the community through fundraisers for families going through hardships. His marketing wizardry landed

“[READ TO SUCCEED] HAS CHANGED MY BUSINESS. WE’VE BEEN HERE A LONG TIME, BUT I HAD NEVER DONE THE VOLUME OF BUSINESS THAT I NOW DO WITH THE SCHOOLS....I PINCH MYSELF SOMETIMES.”

Scott Van Duzer, Big Apple Pizza



The Children's Services Council has been a crucial Read to Succeed partner, providing free books by the thousands.

him on PMQ's May 2007 cover; to this day, he happily remains a single-unit operator, devoting his free time to his growing family and to his nonprofit, the Van Duzer Foundation, which he started in 2008.

The foundation's projects include First Step, featuring high-profile athletes engaging communities on issues ranging from child hunger to unemployment and homelessness among LGBTQ youth. To encourage blood donations, Van Duzer and kids from a local Boys & Girls Club once embarked on a 30-day bicycle ride from West Palm Beach to Washington, D.C. "We rode 1,180 miles and all the way we held blood drives along the East Coast. We had lunch with the Surgeon General, who was so amazed that she cleared her whole schedule that day....It was pretty remarkable."

READ TO SUCCEED

Suffice it to say that, whereas many hometown pizzerias give back to their communities upon request, Van Duzer doesn't usually wait to be asked.



"WE BUILT THE SLOWEST DAY OF MY WEEK INTO A DAY THAT'S COMPARABLE WITH A FRIDAY. WE'RE BRINGING 200 TO 300 FAMILIES HERE AND DOING \$2,000 TO \$4,000 IN BUSINESS WITH THEM."

Scott Van Duzer, Big Apple Pizza

The Read to Succeed program, however, did start with an ask of sorts. "A local reporter reached out to me while he was writing a story on literacy scores in Florida, particularly in my community," he recalls. "They weren't that great, and he asked if there was something the foundation could do for a more positive ending to the story. We came up with the program in five days.

"We wanted to start encouraging kids to read," he continues. "You learn to read up until third grade. After that, they stop teaching reading, and you read to learn." But

not all third-graders pick up the skill. Many don't have access to books outside their schools—no books to call their own and read at home. "In the lower-income households, there's only one book for every 300 kids," Van Duzer says. "But in the middle to higher-income homes, there's 13 books for every child. I mean, that's a huge discrepancy."

Alarmed by these statistics, Van Duzer approached local school administrators with a tantalizing offer: Big Apple Pizza would host an

LAKWOOD PARK ELEMENTARY'S BIG APPLE PIZZA NIGHT

Read to Succeed Contest!

One Night Only
Wednesday, December 4th
4:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Big Apple located By Indian River State College
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THE SCHOOL THAT HAS THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WILL WIN PRIZES & ALL PHONE ORDERS THAT MENTION LAKWOOD PARK ELEMENTARY WILL RECEIVE A PORTION TOWARDS OUR PARTICIPATION PERCENTAGE.

1ST PLACE WINS \$10,000

Let's do this!



event every Wednesday night for a different school in the district and give away age-appropriate books to every child in attendance. School superintendents and principals live harried lives and typically don't have time for such pitches. But they knew Van Duzer for his big heart and were soon sold on Read to Succeed's potential for improving reading scores—and its simplicity.

He also approached the Children's Services Council, which donated thousands of books for the program. Then, with a nudge from Florida's House of Representatives, Scholastic donated 10,000 books for the first year and 10,000 more for year two. Pepsi, meanwhile, donates the sodas.

Before long, Van Duzer's simple idea had mushroomed into a region-wide phenomenon. The schools themselves handle the marketing for every event. Each school creates and distributes its own fliers to kids and parents. All Van Duzer has to do is fire up the ovens and dish out the slices. "It started out pretty modestly—for the first year, I think we had 3,100 kids in nine weeks come out," he says. "The child reads a little chapter book with their parent, and we give them a free slice



To store thousands of books, a contractor will turn Big Apple's patio into an enclosed reading room, "and the community's coming together to help offset the cost," Van Duzer says.

"FOR ONE PRETTY BIG SCHOOL, THEIR MARCHING BAND HAD A DRUMLINE MARCH RIGHT THROUGH THE STORE, DO A LITTLE CIRCLE AND MARCH RIGHT BACK OUT."

Scott Van Duzer, Big Apple Pizza

and Pepsi. The school, in turn, gets credit for every kid that comes out."

Many of the kids, of course, bring their families along to enjoy a full meal at the weekly event, packing the restaurant on an otherwise slow night. Big Apple Pizza gives 50% of the evening's sales—"not the profits, but the sales," Van Duzer notes—back to the school. "In the first year of the program, we handed \$15,854 back directly to the schools and also gave \$10,000 to the school that had the most participation in the program."

A WIN-WIN-WIN

After giving away 8,249 books that first year and earning recognition from Florida Governor

Ron DeSantis, the program kept growing, and the goodwill—and the hype—started building. Before long, it was more than a slice-and-a-book giveaway. For the area's larger schools, it's now a full-blown hootenanny. "I own my freestanding building," Van Duzer says, "so they'll close the parking lot down, put up tents out there, and their band and cheerleaders come out. For one pretty big school, their marching band had a drumline march right through the store, do a little circle and march right back out. You never know what you're gonna have."

Teachers, administrators, coaches, band members, cheerleaders—these are the hometown influencers that drive repeat business. And every Wednesday night during the school year, they're piling into Big Apple Pizza. "When I tell you that we have a reading night, you might think 15 or 20 kids come out. But we're getting 200, 300, 400 kids on a Wednesday. To call it a reading program doesn't do it justice. Until you see it for yourself, you can't really comprehend the hugeness of it."

The bottom line: "We built the slowest day of my week into a day

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The Van Duzer Foundation has received an award from the Florida Department of Education as well as donations from companies like One Overvue, a financial planning firm.

that’s comparable with a Friday,” Van Duzer says. “We’re bringing 200 to 300 families here and doing \$2,000 to \$4,000 in business with them. It builds relationships with the schools, and they’re so loyal. It’s a win-win-win: a win for the community, for my sales, and for the kids because we’re putting books in their hands.”

“THIS CAN BE DONE ANYWHERE”

Van Duzer also envisions Read to Succeed as a win for other pizzerias across the U.S., and he’s eager to help them implement the program. *PMQ Pizza* first published an article on the program at PMQ.com in May. Thanks to that story, Van Duzer says he heard from around a dozen pizzerias who want to adopt Read to Succeed for their communities. With this article, he hopes that number will grow exponentially. And he’ll be ready.

“We’ve put together a guidebook for how to do it at your pizzeria: how to reach out to the schools, how

to work with different officials, other key players and decision-makers,” he says. “We want to make it easier, so other pizzerias won’t deal with the struggles we [initially] went through. It’ll be a turnkey operation.”

Van Duzer knows restaurant competition is its own kind of battlefield, and staying alive as a business gets harder every day. “Money’s tight, budgets are tight,” he says. “It’s not a matter of opening the doors and hoping people come in. You have to find a little niche. You might put out the best food and service, but you have to get involved in the community.”

And since kids today have a greater voice in the family’s decisions on where and what to eat, winning them over to your side is increasingly important. Van Duzer has reaped the benefits of that trend, and, as a man who delights in helping others, he wants to share the largesse with any fellow pizzeria owner looking for a leg up in an uncertain economy.

Want to launch the **Read to Succeed** program at your pizzeria? Email Scott Van Duzer at scott@vanduzerfoundation.org for a free handbook with turnkey implementation.

“WE’VE PUT TOGETHER A GUIDEBOOK FOR HOW TO DO IT AT YOUR PIZZERIA: HOW TO REACH OUT TO THE SCHOOLS, HOW TO WORK WITH DIFFERENT OFFICIALS, OTHER KEY PLAYERS AND DECISION-MAKERS.”

Scott Van Duzer, Big Apple Pizza

“A lot of small operators like myself...you’re worried, and you’re overwhelmed by the numbers, the rising prices of everything,” Van Duzer says. “You’re looking at the cheese prices, and you get so focused on that stuff. And if you don’t run your pizzeria, your

pizzeria runs you. But you have the ability to think outside the box about what can drive people to your business. Although that wasn’t my intention—I just wanted to get a positive result out of a bad news report—it’s turned into something [much bigger]. I can’t really put it

into words. I get kids running up to give me a hug. You get 500, 600 people in your shop, just having a good time. I’ll be doing this for the rest of my life.”

And, Van Duzer points out, “It’s not lightning in a bottle. This can be done anywhere, and it can improve other pizzerias’ business, too. If you want to separate your business from another pizzeria, think about giving back to your community and working with the people in your community, and it’ll come back tenfold to you.” ❖

Rick Hynum is PMQ Pizza’s editor in chief.

SCHOOL SPIRIT

“Literacy is the great equalizer in society,” says Kathy Baich-Potenza, principal of St. Lucie Elementary School in Fort Pierce, Florida. “When students become literate individuals, they are equipped with the tools necessary to break free from the constraints of generational poverty.” Big Apple Pizza’s Read to Succeed program has elevated reading proficiency at local schools while lighting the spark of imagination for kids. It has also endeared owner Scott Van Duzer—and his pizzeria—to the St. Lucie County community. Here’s what school administrators in Fort Pierce have to say about him:

Our students eagerly anticipate the books Scott provides, enticed by a slice of pizza and a soda, and they leave these events with a newfound passion for exploring new worlds through literature. The excitement and engagement generated by these events have had a profound impact on our community.

Scott exemplifies the qualities we should all aspire to embody. His selflessness shines through his unwavering dedication to our community. Scott generously offers his time, resources and even his restaurant, all in the name of making a meaningful difference in children’s lives.... When he identifies an issue, he dives in headfirst and mobilizes the necessary resources to create

a lasting impact. The world could undoubtedly benefit from more people like Scott.

—**Kathy Baich-Potenza**, principal, St. Lucie Elementary School

Over the past two years, (Weatherbee Elementary sister school) Fairlawn Elementary has won the Read to Succeed program, earning funds that supported tutoring and additional reading materials. This contributed to an almost 10% increase in overall reading proficiency, as well as significant gains among our lowest performing students. I attribute these improvements to greater access to books, engaging reading activities, and challenges

that motivate our students, beginning each year with our Read to Succeed night led by Mr. Van Duzer. The pride that the students feel walking out with their own stack of books and delicious pizza is priceless!

Scott is more than just a community leader; he is a community changer....He’s putting books in the hands of students and families, and that is doing more than he knows. He’s creating bedtime routines of parents and students reading together. He’s creating adventures that are beyond the scope of some of our families, and that can never be taken away.

—**Heather Ricksecker**, principal, Weatherbee Elementary School