

## Win a café with the stroke of a pen

Harry and Roxana McKaig are selling their rural Oregon café through an essay contest. The winner receives Ma & Pa's Café and \$50,000 in initial capital in a one-stoplight town where the scenery is stunning, the cost of living is low and life is simple and slow.

**By Jeff Louderback**

**Imbler, Oregon** – Born on the same day and year – November 23, 1952 - Harry and Roxana McKaig are a husband and wife who often take an adventurous route when charting their next course.

When Harry was searching for a new career, and the couple wanted to move their family from the heavy crime and frenetic pace of New Jersey, they packed their belongings and journeyed across the country to a simpler life in rural Oregon. Then, after a successful venture operating a New York hot dog stand, they bought the only restaurant in Imbler, a town of 380 situated amid the Blue Mountains along the Hell's Canyon Scenic Byway in northeast Oregon.

Now, because of Harry's health – he has experienced five heart attacks and one open heart surgery – the McKaigs are selling Ma & Pa's Café. Rather than posting a for-sale sign, the couple is giving their 40-seat restaurant to the person who writes the most compelling essay. The winner receives the deed to the café with a fully paid mortgage and \$50,000 in initial capital. All for an entry fee of \$150 and an essay that begins with "I would like to own Ma & Pa's Café because..." and is followed by 500 words of descriptive prose. A full description of the rules, regulations and guidelines can be found at [www.winacafe.com](http://www.winacafe.com).

"The American dream is to have your own business," Harry McKaig said. "With this essay contest, we feel that we are giving someone an opportunity to live that dream by using their creative skills and expressing why they want to own and operate Ma & Pa's Café."

The contest will continue through August 1, at which time a group of four judges will review the essays over a "six to eight week time period," Harry McKaig said. Judges will be unknown to each other, and identities of participants will be undisclosed as well since essays must include words like "I" and "we" instead of specific names.

Once all essays are received, they will be divided into two groups and narrowed down through a series of elimination rounds, much like a basketball tournament. When the finalists are determined, the McKaigs will select a winner.

“We have no control over who the finalists will be since the judges are choosing them, and their identities are unknown,” Harry McKaig explained. “The number of judges and finalists will depend on the number of entries received.”

Imagination, creativity, expression of thought, wit and positive social values are among the qualities included in the judging criteria.

“You don’t have to be a professional writer,” Roxana McKaig said. “We just want to find someone who best explains his or her reasons for wanting to own a café in Imbler.” The McKaig’s path to Imbler started more than 3,000 miles east in New Jersey, where the couple met in elementary school.

“I was her paperboy when I was 10 years old. She didn’t like me too much, though. She always used to kick me,” Harry McKaig said with a laugh. “Then, when we were in ninth grade, I asked her to a dance. She said yes, and we’ve been together ever since.”

After serving four years in the Army, Harry worked in retail management for Texaco before the hours, the career, and the fast pace and high crime left him looking for a lifestyle change. His brother lived in LaGrande, a town of 16,000 located 12 miles from Imbler, and that is where the McKaigs settled in the early 1990s. Heart problems sent Harry into retirement for awhile, and then he decided to open a New York hot dog stand with Roxana in downtown LaGrande.

“We called it ‘Poppy’s Tastee Dogs’ and we would sell 18,000 frankfurters in only six months,” he said. “Even now, when I walk around LaGrande, people call me Poppy.” Initially, Poppy’s consisted of a small stand, selling Sabrett’s hot dogs that were flown in from New York City. Then, the McKaigs bought a trailer with a water system and generator. Regulations, though, required them to remove the trailer from its spot at the corner of a gas station every night.

The McKaigs grew tired of the daily set up and tear down process, so when they heard that the only restaurant in Imbler was for sale, they decided to enter the restaurant business in a town where the scenery is stunning, the cost of living is low and crime is rare. With Harry’s continued heart problems, the long hours have proven to be too exhaustive for the couple. So they are searching for a new owner who is passionate about living the American dream in a one-stoplight town where customers include farmers who pull into the parking lot behind the wheel of a combine; outdoor enthusiasts who flock to the area for its rich hunting and fishing; and locals who gather at the café and the nearby country store for lively conversation.

In addition to a fully paid mortgage and \$50,000, the essay contest winner will assume ownership of a café that grossed \$124,000 in 2004 serving only lunch and dinner. McKaig initially offered breakfast, but then stopped.

“I don’t know how to make eggs, so I decided that we would focus on lunch and dinner,” Harry McKaig said with a laugh. “One morning, I came out to each table and said

“Here’s \$20 for breakfast at Denny’s.’ I think the townspeople would appreciate it if the new owner would serve breakfast.”

The McKaigs, also invested \$28,000 to upgrade the café with new electrical wiring, plumbing, air conditioning, tables and countertops.

To ensure that every legal base is covered, the McKaigs consulted with a private attorney and the state attorney general’s office, which says that there is an assortment of guidelines to be met when selling a business through an essay contest. The main requirement stipulates that the contest must be by one of skill, not of chance.

“Our essay contest is based on writing skills. The winning essay will be selected strictly for its words,” Harry McKaig said. “We talked to the attorney general’s office, and according to what they told us we’ve done everything right.”

As required by the law, entry fees will be deposited into an account until the winner is selected, Harry McKaig said. Each essay must begin with, “I would like to own Ma & Pa’s Café because...,” and can be followed with a maximum of 500 words. The essay must be sent through U.S mail, and not in person, and be accompanied by a check or money order for \$150. The McKaigs reserve the right to extend the entry deadline beyond August 1 if the minimum of 2,000 entries is not reached by that time. The contest may be canceled if enough entries are not received. If so, Harry McKaig said, refunds will be given.

The McKaigs believe that the contest will generate at least the minimum number of entries, and that a new owner will realize the dream of operating his or her own business. The couple, who live in LaGrande, will remain in the area.

“We’ll be available for advice if the new owner wants it,” Harry McKaig said. “we’re doing everything we can to make sure the winner has long-term success”

The McKaigs say they will also eat at the café, where the menu includes everything from T-bone steaks and boneless ribeyes to reuben sandwiches and flame-broiled Angus burgers.

“I may even stop in for breakfast,” Harry McKaig said with a grin. “I like eating eggs much more than I do making them.”