

'Mom' develops My Own Meals for kids

By BILL DOTSON
News/Voice Staff Writer

Mary Anne Jackson knew she wanted to go into some aspect of the food business but wasn't sure exactly how she would go about it. She walked up and down the aisles of the grocery store, thoughtfully scanning the shelves seeking to discover what was there was a need for.

She noticed that there was a lot of baby food on the market as well as much food targeted for adolescents, but very little in between. "Spaghetti O's was about the only thing there was," she said.

She decided there was room for something new and different — and the idea for My Own Meals was born.

My Own Meals, a Deerfield-based company, consists of a line of five nutritionally balanced, pre-packaged meals for children 2 to 8 years old. The present line, which Jackson expects to expand eventually, includes My Favorite Pasta, My Kind of Chicken, My Meatballs and Shells, My Turkey Meatballs, and Chicken, Please. The dinners are all packed in shelf-stable pouches, are light, and don't require refrigeration.

THE MEALS are designed to help parents with little time to cook still be able to provide tasty and nutritious meals for their children.

Jackson, a former executive with the Beatrice Corporation, knew first-hand about the difficulty of being a working mother with children to care for. She has a 4-year-old daughter, Katie, and 17-month-old son, Joey.

To make sure her kids were eating right, she used to try to have dishes ready before she went to work and would give the baby-sitter a list of what to serve with them. Friends in a similar situations were impressed with her prepared-meals approach, the forerun-

ner of the My Own Meals idea.

My Own Meals, Inc. is headquartered at 400 Lake-Cook Rd. Jackson, who is originally from the east coast but has lived in Deerfield for 12 years, serves as the president and chairman of the board. Beth Martin, a former co-worker at Beatrice, is vice-president. There are two other full-time employees and a number of people who work for the company on a part-time or contractual basis.

THE COMPANY was incorporated on Oct. 31, 1986, as the result of about a year and a half of market research. Jackson got much positive feedback on the idea through questionnaires she sent out to mothers through a diaper delivery service.

Jackson says the whole concept was very exciting to busy mothers who had a very limited choice of convenient yet nutritious meals to serve their children. "With these, a kid can decide a minute-and-a-half before he eats, what to have for dinner," she said.

The food is heated by boiling or microwaving right in the pouch.

The package was designed to be appealing to parents. The My Own Meals logo, which features silhouettes of a boy and girl eating primly, is meant to get parents to think "I'd like my kids to eat like that."

THERE'S A SIGNED endorsement from Jackson on the back with an artist's rendering of her and daughter Katie. The package also has instructions in Spanish as well as English, Jackson says, because many Hispanic people care for children.

Although Jackson is very much the center of My Own Meals, she stresses that the company has a family atmosphere. The workers at the company's South Carolina production plant call her "Mom."

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Figuring out what to give the kids for dinner led Deerfield's Mary Anne Jackson to form her own company, My Own Meals. The packaged meals, for kids ages 2-8, are nutritionally sound and easily prepared. Staff photo by Peggy Pollard.