

OWNERS @ WORK

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WE THE OWNERS

EMPLOYEES EXPANDING THE AMERICAN DREAM



Broadening Awareness of Employee Ownership

Mary Ann Beyster Discusses Her New Film

We the Owners

Telling the Employee Ownership Story With Images

An Interview with Mary Ann Beyster

What would employee owners themselves say about what it means to own their company? The Foundation for Enterprise Development (FED) decided to find out; partnering with Passage Productions, FED recently released We the Owners, a feature length documentary movie that focuses on 3 employee owned companies and their stories. O@W interviewed Executive Producer Mary Ann Beyster to find out more. The interview was conducted via a series of emails as during a transcontinental promotional tour for the film.

Q: I'd like to start with what might be an impossible question...describe *We the Owners* to us in two paragraphs or less!

A: *We the Owners* is a documentary film produced by the Foundation for Enterprise Development and directed by Passage Productions. The film features the founders and employee owners from three innovative employee-owned businesses: New Belgium Brewing, Namasté Solar, and DPR Construction. Each has chosen different employee ownership models yet are driven by common principles such as a belief in sharing responsibility, risks, and rewards of running a business.

We the Owners provides a face and voice to entrepreneurial people who are part of building successful companies through this model while overcoming challenges of founding companies, expansion, recruitment, and succession.

Q: What inspired you to take the plunge and **make a movie, and specifically this movie?**

A: Employee ownership, as a business model, is not the dominant form of corporate ownership, nor is it integrated into mainstream education. I wanted to make a film to help bridge this gap by bringing digital storytelling to more classrooms, training rooms, boardrooms, and entrepreneurial centers.

Successfully thriving in the global economy of the 21st century and beyond will require new business models and strategies to enable the American Dream of opportunity and economic prosperity. One model is employee ownership. This film is part of a larger research and education movement about employee ownership and workers cooperatives occurring across the U.S. and worldwide.

Q: Which companies did you highlight in **the movie?**

A: *We The Owners* includes interviews with founders, managers and other employee-owners of three privately-held companies across different industries and

ranging in size with meaningful employee ownership, DPR Construction (2,729 employees), New Belgium Brewery (435 employees), and Namasté Solar (100 employees). DPR's employee ownership is structured using stock and phantom stock, New Belgium Brewery is structured as an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP), and Namasté Solar requires stock purchases and governance as a worker cooperative (one share, one vote).

Each has received third-party recognition for their innovative and best practices in their specific industry; each has focused on the culture of ownership. Through these companies, we wanted to show how employee ownership works in different models at privately-held companies of different sizes, in different industries, and including with different labor relations (including union employees). Their stories are not only relevant to other employee-owned companies, but also to companies that desire to have high-levels of employee engagement and empowerment.

Q: How did you go about identifying the companies you wanted to have participate **in the movie?**

A: It took several months to identify and confirm participation of the companies to be included in the film. We started the process by reviewing lists of top employee-owned companies such as available from NCEO, ESOP Associations, and "Best Places to Work". In parallel, I contacted the Beyster Institute, trade and non-profit organizations and consultants who work directly with companies and received many suggestions. Many people supported us in reaching out directly to each company to test the waters about their participation. From there, we requested open access and received it. Within one month of that initial contact, we were planning the visit for the shoot.

Q: Was there any hesitancy on the part

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of the companies and employee owners to **talk about themselves on camera?**

A: The companies were all extremely helpful in identifying employees with the range of experience and perspectives that we were seeking and making them available. I had budget for sending the director and one cameraman to each company for one visit of two days. They conducted telephone interviews to help narrow down whom to speak with onsite. On location, they interviewed more than five people at each company and came back with more than 25 hours of footage. That doesn't even include the 14 interviews (another 15 hours of footage) filmed at the 2011 NCEO/Beyster Institute annual conference in Denver, Colorado, where we began filming.

Although some people are naturally more comfortable in front of a camera, everyone was passionate and genuine about their responses. Many factors come into play when dealing with what gets selected to be in a film. It comes down to selecting which prominent cast must be in the film to tell the story while making sure the viewer can decipher who is who.

Q: Did you personally travel to all the **locations that were filmed?**

A: I worked with the director to develop the interview guide. We tested it out at the NCEO/Beyster Institute conference and the interview process went very well. It wasn't necessary for me to be at the interviews. In fact, it was better to not have an employee-ownership expert part of the interviews since this kept the interview unscripted and devoid of leading questions.

Q: Though you have lifetime of experience in the world of employee ownership, were there surprises in any of the stories you

heard that either taught you something new about employee ownership or made **you think about it in a different way?**

A: During the pre-screenings, we visited several business school classes. I was surprised by how little students knew of the range of employee-ownership choices. I was encouraged by the depth of questions, and also hopeful that the film would serve a valuable role in educating and creating dialog.

Q: I hear that you are in the middle of a whirlwind international promotional tour for the movie. Where have you been/will **you be?**

A: I am currently on a European screening tour in nine cities and eleven screenings. The first screening was at University of Stirling in Scotland. I am continuing to Aberdeen and Inverness in the Highlands, then south to St. Andrews, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. We have screenings at York and London, England, and wrapping up at INSEEC in Paris, France. The majority of screenings are at universities.

Q: **What has that experience been like?**

A: My hosts in Scotland—Hugh Donnelly of Co-operative Education Trust Scotland (CETS), Sarah Deas of Co-operative Development Scotland (CDS), their team, Carole Leslie, David Erdal, and professors—have been incredible welcoming. We share a common goal of introducing a range of employee ownership and cooperative models to more people, and have more successful adoption via research, education, and awareness building. The UK tour continues in a few days with Andrew Pendleton at York and comes to a finale with Baxi Partnership and Cass Business School.

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New Belgium Brewing Co-Owners 2010



DPR Construction co-owners.

Although aspects of our legal framework and history in employee ownership and cooperatives are different, it all really comes down to how to run an organization where employees are and act like owners. I am finding we have much in common between the U.K. and the U.S. business and academics, and that making this discussion and adoption mainstream is a common desire and challenge. We have much to learn from each other, and collaborations seem a natural course for growth.

Q: How has the reception to the movie been?

A: Very positive. There is plenty of discussion after each screening, which is exactly what I had hoped for. Typically, the discussion quickly moves past the American aspects of the film such as the title, and the use of the certain U.S. terms (e.g., turnover, groovy). Questions and dialog have covered a range from topics including the founder's incentive to use one of these models, growth and recruitment, financing, maintaining employee engagement, and community wealth and stability. Like in any company, industry or any region of the U.S., there will be different ways employee ownership fits into an industry or regional/global economy. What occurs in Aberdeen will look different from what occurs in Inverness, for example, however we all have common goals with employee ownership and the overall reception to the movie has been very encouraging.

Q: What is your long-term plan for the movie; is it a part of a longer term initiative of the Beyster Institute?

A: A. FED has DVDs available for purchase now, and by May, the film is available on all platforms (e.g., DVD, streaming) through Films for the Humanities and Science, the leading educational film distributor. We are working on a few ideas for multimedia, digital storytelling. I would like the FED to make more films, and so am thinking through ideas now. All these products are for broadening awareness and expanding the education tool kit about employee ownership

and its broader context for business, communities, and academia. The Beyster Institute is leading the way in education by teaching at the Rady School of Management at University of California, San Diego, including students in consulting assignments, and training the next generation of leaders of the employee-ownership movement.



Fall 2005: Namaste Solar Co-Founders (from left: Blake Jones, Ray Tuomey, Wes Kennedy)

Q: One final question: what did you learn about making a documentary film?

A: In documentary film, you are telling stories with a beginning, middle, and end. But when you begin the filming, you don't actually know what the story is. I had an idea of messages to be captured. You don't know which people will be best in front of the camera, what people will say, what the challenges are or where the tensions will be found, or how all these minutes of footage will connect.

I actually thought the story would be about the next generation expressing the values to lead a new model of

profit-seeking companies with broader aspirations for shared ownership, collaboration, and innovation. With more than 15 hours of footage, we realized that a story wasn't materializing. So we changed to a case study approach. It took many months of rough draft reviews (after the release of the trailer) and editing to determine the final story arc.

This is not for the faint of heart. I recall a few tense moments, some initiating cross-corrections to get the results that we wanted. This has been a three-year journey, from concept to final product, which is longer than I had anticipated. But every moment has been worth it. The core team and many collaborators brought their talents in filmmaking, editing, sound, research and statistics, education, and social media together and worked hard to get it right.

Now in distribution and outreach phase, we will continue to build collaborations and be ready to make adjustments as the interest arises.

Log on to <http://www.wetheowners.com> to view the trailer and order the film. OAW