

Making It

A Military Officer Retires And Goes Bananas

By [Elizabeth Chang](#)

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It's common for military retirees in Washington to launch second careers as federal workers or defense contractors. Banana-bread bakers? Not so much. But retired Army National Guard Lt. Col. Mike Lawrence has made his 10-year-old sideline business his new full-time job. "You have to go with what you believe," he says.

His quest started in the early '90s, when Mike, who grew up in Connecticut and always liked to cook, was a divorced single dad. His autistic son, Robby, loves bananas, and Mike sometimes wound up with a lot of overripe fruit. Not wanting it to go to waste, Mike started making banana bread, which Robby seemed to like. Then he began adding chocolate and nuts to the breads. "He kept eating them," says Mike, 51, who hands out banana-shaped business cards, refers to himself as the Top Banana and jokes that his product is "thick and dense, just like me."

In 1998, the full-time member of the Guard decided to start planning his post-retirement career. He named his business Havana Banana because "I'd always loved warm climates, and it was easy to remember, and it rhymed," and whiled away the hours of his Metro commute dreaming up recipes. In 2001, when Mike took a three-year assignment in Florida, he rented a commercial kitchen so he could start selling the breads. "I baked at night and on weekends," he says. "I mashed the bananas, I made the breads, I cleaned the pots." By the time he left Florida, he estimates, he was making 50 to 75 made-to-order loaves of bread each week for local and Internet customers.

In 2004, Mike returned to Washington and a job at the Guard headquarters in Arlington, where his "Seinfeldian-based humor" and "fabulous homemade breads" were much appreciated, according to former co-worker Claire Henline. Between the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina, he couldn't devote the attention he wanted to his business, and talks with a commercial bakery fell through.

After retiring this past fall, the Laurel resident found a retail bakery in Ellicott City that would let him use its equipment, notified his old customers, revived his Web presence and started baking again -- with the support of his second wife, an Army retiree who now works at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Mike sells loaves at Eastern Market and on the Internet, and slices are available at three Washington area shops. He currently offers

six of his 30 concoctions, including his signature pecan praline (he makes the pralines, too). Online prices range from \$9 to \$14.

John Oullet of Detroit, who has been an Internet customer on and off for years, likes Mike's banana bread because it is moist and because Mike doesn't skimp on the ingredients. "Nobody ever said, 'Oh, it's okay.' Everyone raves about it," Oullet says.

In 10 years, Mike estimates that he has put more than \$60,000 of his own money into the business for costs including lawyers' fees and specially designed shipping boxes. He has made about \$20,000 in the past decade, before expenses. Because he's debt-free, can devote himself to Havana Banana full time and makes a 50 percent profit on sales, he says, "I can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Meanwhile, Robby, who inspired it all, is now 22 and goes to a day program in Annapolis. "He's nonverbal; he's never going to live independently. But he's healthy and happy," Mike says. "I know he loves to eat, and he loves my banana breads."