

# From Hurricane Recovery to Franchise Empire

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Cathy Deano built a business at 55, challenging the assumption that it's ever too late to build something big.

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as New Orleans and surrounding communities struggled to rebuild their lives, Cathy Deano was just trying to help her neighbors heal. She and a close friend created an art space where people could come together, paint and reconnect in a world turned upside down. What started as a passion project to relieve stress and bring people together would become something neither woman could have imagined: a franchise empire that now spans more than 230 locations nationwide.

Today, at 72, Deano is still actively leading [Painting with a Twist](https://www.paintingwithatwist.com/), the company she founded at 55 with no franchising experience and just \$8,000 in startup capital. Her story challenges every assumption about when it's "too late" to start something big.

## Finding Purpose in Crisis

The emotional landscape after Katrina was unlike anything Deano and her co-founder had experienced. "We were just moms and community volunteers trying to navigate a time when the New Orleans area was still reeling," Deano recalls. "We wanted to do something meaningful to help people in our same situation but also to be able to add to our families' bottom line."

Their solution was elegantly simple: create a space

where people could paint, socialize and temporarily escape the stress of rebuilding their lives. They weren't thinking about business models or scalability — they were thinking about community healing.

But Deano wasn't entirely new to entrepreneurship. Coming from "a long line of entrepreneurs" — both grandfathers, her father and both siblings owned businesses — she'd previously run a catering company, a restaurant and a jewelry business. "Honestly, I have never been afraid of starting my own business," she says.

Still, what happened next surprised everyone, including Deano herself.

## The Franchise "Aha" Moment

By 2009, just a few years after launching their first location, Painting with a Twist had expanded to three studios in Louisiana. Then something unexpected happened: within two weeks, customers from three different states approached them wanting to open franchises.

"This was our 'aha' moment," Deano says, "although we weren't even sure how franchising worked."

What followed was a crash course in business expansion that would have intimidated entrepreneurs half her age. Suddenly, she was reviewing protected territories, negotiating leases and parsing insurance policies. "When I realized I was reading contracts and suggesting what points to negotiate, I knew I was possibly in over my head," she admits.

Her solution? "I panic for about 10 minutes, but then I proceed to tackle the issue with a calm, clear head." She leveraged her family's collective expertise — her brother, a real estate attorney, and sister, a real estate appraiser — and approached each challenge methodically. "How do you eat an elephant?" she asks,



referencing the old joke's punchline: "One bite at a time."

## Defying Expectations

The numbers tell a remarkable story. From that \$8,000 investment, Painting with a Twist grew into a national powerhouse. The company never borrowed additional money until COVID-19 hit, a testament to careful, sustainable growth. More impressively, in 2020, Deano co-founded Twist Brands LLC, expanding into the broader arts and crafts entertainment space with brands like [Color Me Mine](https://www.colormemine.com/) and [Chesapeake Ceramics](https://chesapeakeceramics.com/).

Last year came perhaps her boldest move yet: acquiring [Pinot's Palette](https://www.pinotpalette.com/), Painting with a Twist's largest competitor. At 71, most people might be thinking about retirement, not major acquisitions.

"If you're not growing, you are dying," Deano explains matter-of-factly. When the opportunity arose, she and her business partners recognized it as a strategic fit. "We already had the expertise, the systems, platforms and programs to support a system of their size."

## The Age Advantage

Throughout her journey, Deano says age was never a factor — not in her mind, anyway. "I was always a [late bloomer](https://www.nextavenue.org/the-perks-of-being-a-late-bloomer/). I received my college degree at 28, had my one and only child at almost 44, and started Painting with a Twist at 55. I never, never let age stop me in any way. Truly I never even thought about it."

This mindset served her well in the franchise world, where she says she experienced no discrimination based on age or gender. "Franchising from my point of view is all inclusive. Since Painting with a Twist is a women-driven business, gender was not part of the conversation," she says.

Her advice to anyone in their 50s or beyond who thinks they've "missed their window" is straightforward: "I think if you have the drive and the motivation, then your age doesn't matter." The key, she says, is surrounding

yourself with "yes you can" people instead of "no you can't" people.

## Building for the Future

Today, Deano remains actively involved in the business, though she's strategically positioned it for long-term success. She brought in three younger business partners who handle the aspects of the business she doesn't enjoy or excel at, while she focuses on what energizes her: development, maintaining company culture and mentoring.

"My first step in preparing my business for the future was to bring in younger partners. Their energy and foresight have propelled us into the success we have become. I am the history, and they are the future."

What keeps her engaged at 72? "First and foremost, it's the franchisees," she says. "They put their trust and their money in my dream, and I take that very seriously."

The community healing aspect that started it all remains central to the business. "Building strong community relationships is the best way to guarantee a successful business," Deano says. Community involvement is built into franchisee training, and "Painting with a Purpose" events that donate proceeds to local nonprofits continue the mission of giving back.

## Lessons From a Late Bloomer

Looking back, Deano offers this wisdom to her 55-year-old self: "Don't think you have to know it all, don't be afraid to ask for help, don't forget your family comes first and remember to help your community along the way."

She's particularly passionate about the importance of a strong support system. "You must believe in yourself, but you also must realize that you don't have all the answers. To move the next [chess](https://www.nextavenue.org/exercise-your-brain-with-chess/) piece, you need to surround yourself with people that believe in you and know a little more than you."

Perhaps most importantly, Deano's story illustrates that some of life's most significant achievements can come when we stop thinking about age as a limitation. In a world obsessed with young entrepreneurs and quick

exits, her steady, community-focused approach to building a business proves that patience, persistence and purpose can create something lasting.

From a post-hurricane art space to a franchise empire spanning hundreds of locations, Cathy Deano's journey reminds us that it's never too late to paint outside the lines — literally and figuratively.