

One on one: Luke Vaillancourt: vice president, Vaillancourt Folk Art

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A graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology, Luke Vaillancourt worked in advertising before an opportunity arose to be director of marketing at his family business, Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton, founded in 1984 by his parents Judi and Gary. Vaillancourt Folk Art offers high-quality, hand-painted holiday ornaments and chalkware, available in 500 different stores across the country all year. Now serving as vice president, Mr. Vaillancourt works to bring his business into the digital age, while managing daily business responsibilities and looking to better serve the small business' 19 employees. Recently, Mr. Vaillancourt was asked by U.S. Rep. James McGovern to join him at the U.S. House of Representatives Small Business Committee Roundtable Discussion, at which 30 small business owners and government employees would discuss ways to help small businesses thrive.

What place do you believe small businesses have in our community?

“I think the most difficult thing for the government and we ourselves as consumers is understanding what a small business actually is. There are a lot of definitions — some definitions are based on the size of employment, and some are based on revenue. For Vaillancourt Folk Art, we have less than 20 employees, and we consider ourselves to be a small business because we are family-owned — we’ve been doing it since 1984 — and because we’re so small we have to really rely on our employees.”

What are some of the struggles that small family-owned businesses face?

“As a small business, we don’t have the luxury or the wiggle room that large corporations have in terms of being able to take risks: Everything we do is calculated, we have to watch our costs, we have to really ensure that we are being as efficient and productive as we can 100 percent of the time. Productivity is dependent on the staff. Our employees on average have been with us for about 17 years, so in that regard our employees truly are like family to us. Back in the ’80s, I remember hearing stories of how my parents cashed out their retirement because they had to make payroll. A lot of people think our biggest challenge is the economy, but what I have found is that our biggest opponent is the government. Governments have these fantastic, conceptual ideas that they want to pass into regulation in order to protect employees. Now those ideas, we’ve already implemented before they’re laws, and what happens is that a lot of these laws that are passed end up having uncalculated burdens and expenses on the business. Laws and regulations are designed to affect all businesses the same way, but every business is affected differently. The burden is never calculated in. Small businesses go through a lot in the struggle to make a business a passion.”

How did you feel being asked to represent not only your business, but also your district at the recent roundtable?

“Congressman McGovern’s chief of staff contacted me the week before and invited me to participate, and what struck me was the fact that this is a national roundtable discussion. Every single congressional member had the opportunity to have someone from their district represented at the discussion. I was told there would be about 50 people from around the country, and when I got there, there were only 23 of us. So the fact that Congressman McGovern picked me to represent his district in the state really blew me away. It was an incredible honor to be 1 of 23 people bending the ear of Congress.”

Who else was at the committee, and what were your impressions?

“The committee itself was made up of people from all around the country. I was a little disappointed in some regards because there wasn’t a fair representation of small business. There were a lot of government contractors, groups that represented lobbyists, but there were only a handful of individuals that were actually what I consider small businesses. One of the businesses that was at the roundtable had over a hundred employees and \$38 million in revenue, and I turned

and looked and thought, 'if they're a small business, then I don't know what we are.' The fact that Congressman McGovern really took the time to think about us in this role shows his dedication into the definition of a small business."

What message were you hoping to convey at the discussion?

My message is very concise – small businesses need to be treated differently than large corporations. There is no one law or regulation that can really be applied to both, because small businesses operate so differently. One message that I ended with at the Congressional Roundtable was that it's not every small business's goal to become a large corporation. For us, our goal is simply to last another generation. It's fitting, because in 1984 when Vaillancourt Folk Art first started, there were a hundred businesses that produced Christmas collectables and gifts in America. It's only been 33 years since then, and today it's a multibillion dollar industry and there are only two companies left in America that make it, so it's our goal to survive another generation so Christmas can continue to be made in America."

What do you see as a result of the Roundtable and in the current political climate?

"I couldn't even fathom that McGovern would allow such a small business to represent the district and, quite frankly, the nation. It would be great if taxes were really analyzed for the businesses, but ultimately every single decision that's made is going to affect a business differently. There's a lot of talk about small businesses, but as I said previously, it's never defined. My hope is that we can continue to work with the state and the federal government to define what a small business is. Our goal as a business is that we can continue to provide jobs for nearly 20 Mass. employees by making Santa Claus. How far out is that?"