



A Honey-making enterprise

The buzz started for Corey Grotte about seven years ago, when he happened upon a honeybee exhibit at a local hardware store put on by a local beekeeping club. He was with his younger daughter, Keea, who was a high school senior at the time and was studying the importance of pollination in biology.

“And that’s when my daughter suggested that we start keeping honeybees,” he said. “That’s what kicked it all off.”

The father-daughter duo soon attended 24 hours of beekeeping classes put on by the club. “We started off with two hives right in our back yard,” Grotte said.

While his teenage daughter eventually lost interest, he became even more intrigued. His two hives in 2016 doubled to four in 2018, and then grew further.

“I have six in my back yard,” he said of his home in Eau Claire, WI. “That’s the most that they allow for the city permit.” His eight others are divided between a small campsite near a lake where Grotte and his family like to spend weekends and a community apiary—a place where bees and their hives are kept—that he helped initiate with the beekeeping club, where he now serves as vice president.

Because of his busy postal schedule, the 25-year letter carrier, who serves as Eau Claire Branch 728 president and Wisconsin State Association vice president/director of education, spends only about an hour or so a week on general upkeep of his hives.

“I look in the little honeycomb cells to make sure the queen is still laying eggs,” he said, and added, “And then twice a year, I check and see if there’s any type of diseases or anything going on in the hive to see if I need to do any type of treatments.”

While many people have gotten into beekeeping, it doesn’t work if the hives are neglected.

“It’s raising *healthy* bees and knowing how to care for them. They’re just like any other animal. You can’t just buy a horse and leave it and not do anything with it,” he said. “You have to care for them. You have to look for diseases and



A jar of Grotte's honey

treat the diseases. They are considered livestock that need attention.”

To tend to his bees, Grotte will wear a bee jacket to protect him from being stung, a veil over his face, and thin latex gloves. “Blue jeans are plenty fine,” he explains. “Their stingers aren’t long enough to go through, but you do want to protect your face just in case anything goes wrong.”

He uses a few beekeeping tools while in the hives, including an extractor for honey, and a smoker, which will keep the bees calm by masking any threatening scents. Keea, who lives nearby, sometimes will help Grotte extract honey or she’ll just visit with the bees.

They harvest honey only once a year, normally in late August or early September, so they can measure “how much honey you need to leave for the bees to survive through the winter,” Grotte said, adding that during the cold season, “there’s no flowers blooming up here in Wisconsin. Everything’s frozen. So, the bees have to stay within their hive, and they need enough food to eat through those winter months.”

Initially, Grotte just collected the honey, but after he discussed with his wife what to do with the beeswax byproduct from the chemical-free hives so it wouldn’t be wasted, the enterprise soon expanded.

“We started making all-natural lip balm with only organic products—with the beeswax that comes directly from the hive,” he said. “I do it all by hand. I get all-organic cocoa butter, shea butter and coconut oil, and I mix that with the beeswax and vitamin E. All these little lip balm tubes are filled by hand, and then they’re sealed.”

That went well, so they began making lotion bars as well, which he says are a bit easier to produce. The mixture is poured into molds, sits until they’re

Grotte tends to his hives.



hardened, and then they’re put into containers.

“A lotion bar is hard like a bar of soap, and you have to rub it into your skin so it gets deep into the cracks and keeps your skin moist, and the beeswax will seal that,” Grotte said. “So, you wash your hands throughout the day, but all the nutrients stay in your skin.”

The carrier, who produces both products out of his home, initially named the business “Sticky Smiles—Eau Claire’s Urban Beekeeper,” but after the birth of his older daughter’s child, Myles, the company name got an upgrade to “Sticky sMyles” to honor their grandson.

Grotte sells the honey, lip balm and lotion bars at some local stores as well as at craft fairs during the summers and on stickysmiles.com. He shares updates at “Sticky Smiles Apiary” on Facebook, too.

Grotte also supports NALC’s official charity, the Muscular Dystrophy Association, donating around \$700 a year through the business. Sometimes it’s through specific products at events, and he always donates 50 percent of proceeds from letter carriers’ orders.

Many co-workers are loyal customers, including one with a spouse who works for UPS, where she talked up the lotion bars to her own colleagues about how it kept her hands smooth during the winter. “And my wife is a nurse,” he added, “so a lot of people



Grotte in his beekeeping suit

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Above: Grotte with daughter Keena
Below: Grandson Myles



from the hospital order also. It's a lot of word of mouth."

"I'm just a hobby guy, you know," Grotte said. "But [it makes] enough to pay for the licensing and insurance. It's nothing I'm going to retire off of."

In his spare time, Grotte teaches beekeeping through the club in two-year mentorships for youth aged 12 to 17. Grotte says that the youngsters do all of the work. "I just tell them what we're looking out for," he said. "I think that's probably one of the funnest things—getting the youth involved so this hobby doesn't die out."

After completing the mentorship, if the kids want to continue keeping bees, they're given supplies.

Grotte, a Navy veteran, also proposed to his beekeeping club the idea of mentoring military veterans through a national nonprofit organization called Hives for Heroes that provides connection and purpose. Through the collaboration, they offer veterans assistance with equipment and guidance with managing an apiary. "We're here for them," Grotte said of the ongoing partnership.

The carrier has begun thinking about his future in beekeeping. "I think I would like to, as I'm getting closer to retirement, have about 25 hives at no more than two locations and just continue this hobby to keep busy," Grotte said, adding that he wants to continue mentoring. He loves watching the kids' eyes in amazement "when they see a product go from nothing to something."



Capturing a swarm

Indeed, Grotte's excitement for honeybees is evident. "Did you know that 90 percent of the hive is all females?" he asked. "The women do all the work. They clean the queen, they feed the queen, they build the wax. They're the ones that do the foraging for pollen and nectar, bringing it back. They're the ones that are converting the nectar to honey. And the male bees just really have no job at all—their only wish in life is to mate with a queen.

"And some of them will never see that, because a queen only mates once in her lifetime, which is about five years if we can keep them. So, when it comes fall time, all the males get their eviction notice and they kick all the males out of the hive," he said. "Just a fun fact."

He loves watching the bees work: "I think they're fascinating, the way they engineer different products." He can relate, industriously making products from what the bees produce, but also using beekeeping to teach youngsters and help veterans.

"It's all rewarding," Grotte said of beekeeping. "And, of course, who doesn't love that golden stickiness that we call honey? The sweet reward." **PR**