



Ice Cream and Climate Action!

**Ben Cohen
Vermont, USA**

When Ben met his friend Jerry in the seventh grade back in 1963, little did they know that together they were going to make the world a better place.

Born in Brooklyn, Ben Cohen grew up in a small town just east of New York City. In the twelfth grade he got his first job, and it held a clue to what his future would be: he became an ice cream man.

Ben went on to have a number of different jobs: he worked as a cashier at McDonald's, delivered pottery wheels to customers, and drove a cab. "I wanted to be a potter: I tried to make a living selling pottery," Ben says. "But no one would buy my pots."

Eventually he became a teacher at the Highland Community School, working with youth who suffered from mental illness. There he picked up his old passion. "Mostly I was making pottery with them," he remembers.

At about the same time, Ben and his old friend Jerry were making big plans. At first, they talked about starting a bagel business. Luckily for the world, the equipment needed for a bagel shop was far too expensive. So a new idea took shape: what about opening an ice cream business?

As he and Jerry were exploring this idea, Ben added a new activity to the curriculum at his school. "We started making ice cream together," he says. "I made a few batches with the kids; it was kind of an extracurricular thing."

Ben and Jerry realized that for their ice cream shop to be successful they should find a town with warm weather and college students. "But all the warm places already had homemade ice cream parlors," Ben says. "So we decided we'd go all the way up to Burlington, Vermont." They started their business in their garage, and they distinguished their brand by giving their flavors hip names and including extra-large chunks in the ice cream.

And their ice cream was a hit—soon everyone in Burlington had heard about it, and wanted to buy it.

That was great, but as the company grew, Ben became increasingly aware of the environmental and social impact their company was having on their community. Social justice issues had been on Ben's mind since an encounter with the police he had in his college years. He had been arrested for smoking pot, but the police let him off the hook with a ticket for littering. A lucky turn of events that wouldn't have happened if Ben wasn't white.

"If I were Black, I probably would have been arrested, thrown into jail, and ended up with a criminal record," Ben said in a statement he made on the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted after the murder of George Floyd. "I never would have been able to get a bank loan or help from the SBA. The reality is there would never have been a Ben and Jerry's."

That incident back in college made Ben wonder who really has power in the United States. And how was that power being used? He came to an important conclusion: he who is silent consents. That is why Ben and Jerry's has always taken a clear stand on social justice issues. For example, in 2018 they introduced a new flavor called "Resist," with the claim, "This pint packs a powerful message under its lid: together, we can build a more just and equitable tomorrow."

The company is also engaged in calling for reform of the justice system: on their website, they urge visitors to sign petitions, and they also support movements on the ground. In St. Louis for example, Ben & Jerry's hit the road for one month, and sold 13,420 scoops of ice cream in support of a coalition that was working toward closing the St. Louis Workhouse Jail—a jail where 90 percent of the inmates were not convicted of anything, but simply couldn't afford to post bail. In addition, 90 percent of these inmates were Black—although people of color make up only 47 percent of the city's population.

In 2015, Ben & Jerry's also honorarily renamed their Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream to “I Dough, I Dough” to celebrate the Supreme Court's decision affirming the fundamental civil right of same sex couples to marry. But the company's commitment to equal rights for same-sex couples goes back to the very beginning of its history: as early as 1989, Ben & Jerry's was the first major employer in Vermont to offer health care benefits to the partners of their employees, including same-sex couples. Their commitment continues to this day: the Human Rights Campaign rates how well companies are doing with regard to protecting LGBTQ rights in the workplace, and in 2020 Ben & Jerry's scored an impressive 100/100.

There is, of course, a close connection between social and environmental issues. “Save our Swirled” is a delicious ice cream that was released in 2015 with a clear message, valid for both the ice cream and our planet: if it's melted, it's ruined!

“I became aware of what was happening to the environment when Earth Day happened for the first time,” Ben says. Vermont prides itself on being one of the greenest states in the U.S. Ben knew that if they wanted to really change things for the better, they had to take a critical look at their own environmental impact.

So, to lower their carbon impact, Ben and Jerry installed a solar array at their factory in Waterbury, Vermont that produces enough energy to cover a third of the factory's demand. They also installed a bio-digester in their factory in Hellendoorn, in the Netherlands, that turns that waste into clean energy.

Back in 1984, when Ben & Jerry's established a public stock offering, their goal was to make the community the owners of the business; so they offered this opportunity to Vermont residents only. They also created the Ben & Jerry's Foundation. Ben made a statement of his personal commitment by donating 50,000 of his company shares to the Foundation, and challenged the board to donate an unprecedented 7.5 percent of their annual pretax profits to philanthropy. They started community programs, encouraged their employees to get involved in social change work, and supported grassroots initiatives on social and environmental justice around the country. Today their grant program awards about \$2.5 million every year to organizations around the U.S. To make the process more transparent and representative, Ben and Jerry made another unusual decision: they decided their employees would be the ones to decide how this money was spent.

They also created the Ben & Jerry's PartnerShop program. They waived the normal franchise fees for Ben & Jerry's shops so that partner businesses that are independently owned by community-based nonprofit organizations could use the profits they made from selling ice cream to support youth and young adults by offering jobs and entrepreneurial training to those who might otherwise face unemployment. “We had this idea: have the nonprofit make the profit,” Ben says.

Over the years, Ben & Jerry's has grown from a single local ice cream parlor into a global business. “When you are led by values, it doesn't cost your business, it helps it,” says Ben. And he has some good advice for young people: “Do something that you are passionate about,” he says.

For Ben, it is important to put worries on hold and take action. “The main thing is that people should start,” he says. “So many times people don't start something because they feel like they don't have enough experience, or they don't know enough. I think it's just important to start really small; if what you're doing resonates with people, it will grow.”

We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.

Howard Zinn

Call to Action: Follow Ben & Jerry's <https://twitter.com/benandjerrys> Try their new ice cream: Pecan Resist! Pecan Resist supports four organizations that are working on the front lines of the peaceful resistance, building a world that supports their values.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com