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NATION

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Ben and Jerry

The socially-conscious ice cream couple talk about nuclear weapons and new flavors

By JEREMY CAPLAN

Their names may be synonymous with ice cream, but Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield have always been passionate about mixing politics into their pints. As Cohen and Greenfield, both 55, embarked on a national tour to raise awareness about the cost of the U.S. nuclear weapons program, they sat down with TIME's Jeremy Caplan to talk about their cause, corporate responsibility and the ice cream they stash in their freezers.

Why are two ice-cream guys talking about weapons?

Ben Cohen: Businesses have tremendous power in this country, and our voice is our best tool. It's crazy that in a country where schools are falling apart, we're spending \$20 billion on nuclear weapons. Having the equivalent of 150,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs at the ready does nothing to protect us from terrorists planning to sneak in a bomb through a cargo container. If we reduced the amount we spend on maintaining our nuclear weapons by a small fraction, we could reallocate those funds to improve kids' health care and schooling.

Jerry Greenfield: It's pretty hard to imagine what we could possibly use 10,000 nuclear bombs for. I mean, how many could you possibly drop? 100? 1,000? What can you do with 10,000 nuclear weapons?

Has it been hard to convince corporate colleagues to support ideological campaigns?

JG: When Ben proposed our first big campaign—the Peace Pop—around the end of the cold war, there was a lot of disagreement within the company about whether it might alienate not just customers or retailers, but people within the company. Ultimately it was well received, because people liked the idea that a business was taking a stand on issues outside of its own self-interest.

To what extent has corporate social responsibility changed?

BC: There's a whole lot of cause-related marketing out there, which I'm not a big fan of. Companies will hook up with a politically-correct charity for a while, but never take a stand on a real political issue. They may be active politically, but it's all in their own economic self-interest and usually covert. To my knowledge, there's never been another company in the U.S. of significant size that's taken a stand against nuclear weapons. We're the first—and we hope we're not the last.

Ben and Jerry's has been part of the conglomerate Unilever since 2000. How does that feel?

BC: I miss having Ben & Jerry's as an independent company. I just wish it still had control over its own destiny. Until recently?for the first two, three, or four years [after the sale?the company was, I don't know how you'd put it...]

JG: Foundering.

How involved are you in daily operations or flavor-designing?

JG: We have no responsibility and no authority. Now we choose things to be involved with that have to do with the social mission of the company, integrating social and environmental concerns.

How did the name come about?

BC: ?Jerry and Ben's' didn't sound as good. I tried out some stupid names like "Josephine's Flying Machine" but Jerry wasn't into any of them.

What flavors have flopped?

JG: One of our really bad ones was Peanut Butter and Jelly, which just never translated well into ice-cream. This summer's Baklava was an ambitious undertaking, but I don't think it's coming back next year. Many things get mushy in ice-cream. They take on moisture and become soggy. Ben is extremely anti-mush. He has a philosophical problem with mushiness.

You guys joke together a lot? have you also fought?

JG: Our biggest disagreement was about chunks. Ben came up with the flavors and I did the manufacturing, and he wanted bigger chunks and I wanted smaller ones with greater distribution. He said people didn't care if you got a chunk in every bite as long as you knew that fairly soon you'd get a chunk.

BC: He recently admitted I was right.

What's in your freezers?

JG: In mine, Heath Bar Crunch, the gold-standard of ice-creams.

BC: My favorite was Mocha Walnut, which is defunct, but these days[after bypass surgery] I like Cherry Garcia frozen yogurt.

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