

West Michigan dads who own businesses leave legacy of leadership, success to their children

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By Ursula Zerilli | The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS — Jesse Girod will never buy clothes as a gift for Father’s Day or any other holiday.

“He’s the worst person to shop for ... neckties and most clothes are absolutely out of the question because he has them all,” said Jesse Girod, 30.

Instead, he went antique shopping and found an old sign that says “Fitzgeralds” on it, which is the perfect gift to display in Jerry Girod’s clothing store — Fitzgeralds Men’s Store in Breton Village — which he started 31 years ago.

Jesse Girod has had the family store on his mind since October, when he decided to move back home from California to help run it.

He turned down other opportunities in business to get into the retail “grind” with his father.

“I love working with my dad,” Jesse Girod said. “Our relationship has grown so much from working because we have to make decisions together. We have to get along as father and son because, when we argue, at the end of the day, we have to make up. We still have work the next day.”

His decision to join the retail store’s staff surprised Jerry Girod, but is not so shocking in an area where 89 percent of the local firms are family-run, according to Grand Valley State University’s Family Business Alliance.

West Michigan is known for family businesses, thanks to success stories named Amway, Meijer Inc., Haworth Inc. and Bissell Inc., among others — all firms where fathers passed leadership roles to their children.

Family businesses thrive on a national scale, as well.

In 2003, family enterprises comprised 80 to 90 percent of all firms and contributed 64 percent to the gross domestic product, according to a 2003 study in Family Business Review.

The last West Michigan survey was completed in 2001, but the alliance's Ellie Frey doubts much has changed.

Frey said that, despite the recession, most family businesses have more longevity than other firms and tend to aim for next-generation success before quarter profits.

"This community understands the important of family businesses more so than other communities," Frey said. "Family businesses are more flexible, take more risks and give back to the community."

She said West Michigan's philanthropic reputation is largely due to the family business model that often values community enrichment.

Christina Keller, a business unit leader at Cascade Engineering, has been working with her father, Fred Keller, chairman and CEO, for two years. Fred Keller started the company in 1973 next door to his dad's business, Paragon Die and Engineering. Fred Keller says he is happy his daughter is excited about the business.

'Heritage of family business'

"One thing I most admire about West Michigan is its heritage of family business and the impact that it has in making this a wonderful place to live, work and play," said Fred Keller, 67, who owns manufacturing company Cascade Engineering. "The distinct difference is how the owners think of their business compared to publicly-owned companies. It can be difficult thinking about how to positively impact the community when it's not a family business."

His daughter, Christina Keller, studied international development and is focused on sustainable solutions. When the 29-year-old felt boxed in at larger corporations, she decided to head back home to work at her father's 37-year-old business a year and a half ago.

"I realized the value in a smaller business," she said. "Grand Rapids is a center for sustainability, and my dad has great innovative ideas."

She leads Cascade's Triple Quest Business Unit, one of 15 branches, which manufactures Hydrad BioSandwater filters. Under her leadership, the filters have been deployed to countries struck by waterborne-illness such as Haiti, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

Fred Keller, a long-time community activist, has garnered admiration and imitation from Christina Keller, who now strives to lead in local sustainability initiatives.

Passing the baton

Eastern Floral's Bing and Jason Goei had a different start.

Bing Goei and his son, Jason, run Eastern Floral. "It's always been part of my dream to create a business large enough that my children can be involved in if they want," Bing Goei said. The two have been working together since Bing Goei bought the company in 2001.

Besides having worked together before in a wholesale company and other projects, they took on the task of buying and rebuilding a bankrupt Eastern Floral, now headquartered at 818 Butterworth St. SW, in 2001.

It is now nationally known within the floral industry, with seven locations in West Michigan.

Jason Goei, 39, is carrying out a succession plan and faces different challenges in terms of taking on more company leadership than the younger Keller and Girod, who are still starting out. But, like them, he admires his dad.

"The biggest thing I picked up from him is the integrity and honesty in how he works," Jason Goei said. "We have different strengths, weaknesses and personalities, but he always does the right thing and I try to do that too."

Over the past decade, Bing Goei has struggled in handing the reigns over to his son and son-in-law Rick Huisman, but he said that the more grandchildren he has, the easier it becomes.

"It was a learning experience for both of us," said the elder Goei, 63, a former candidate for state representative and member of the West Michigan Business Hall of Fame.

"It is a challenge that every family-owned business has with a succession plan, because that responsibility really lies on the father and mother to make the break and allow the children to function as leaders."

Generational differences

The Girods said it took time to realize what their new roles encompassed at Fitzgeralds once Jesse joined management.

"Being a family business, we do everything," Jerry Girod said. "But you both can't do everything. We figured it out and, now, it allows us more time to focus on different things. It's very fascinating that I can teach him an equal amount of what I can learn from him because his generation views one situation so differently than my age group."

Fred Keller said he experienced the "full nervousness a father would feel" when Christina rose to a leadership position. He wants her to succeed but is reluctant to intervene in her affairs.

"The fact is, the best way to learn is to experience all of the difficulties and challenges firsthand and learn from them," he said. "My major objective is to be a resource and teach her how to be the best servant leader."

Handing down something as lofty as a business poses struggles for a father, especially since only two-thirds of all family businesses survive a second generation. But the rewards are hard to beat from a dad's point of view.

“The fact that he would want to work with me and would choose — out of all of the opportunities he had — working with me makes me very happy,” Jerry Girod said.

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