

Siblings Cheryl and Aharon Boghosian grew up working in their parents' interior design business, Gilberte Interiors, then spent time away — she to work for an interior design firm in Boston, and he to work for a window treatment vendor — before returning to run the business together. "We got to learn the business literally from the ground up," Aharon Boghosian said.



IT'S ALL

When it comes to these Upper Valley employees, business is in their blood.

RELATIVE

BY MATT GOLEC

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was just 10 years ago,” he said.

And shoppers can always go across the river to New Hampshire for bigger stores and no sales tax. Fortunately for Dan & Whit’s, Norwich has a well-off population that values having a local store that carries a little bit of everything. But it’s still something that concerns Fraser.

“I really believe if we weren’t in Norwich, we wouldn’t be in business,” he said.

THE CHALLENGES OF A FAMILY BUSINESS

Richard G. Reece spent his life in the business world, working for a big New York accounting firm, taking various companies public, and even coming out of retirement to join Global Rescue in Lebanon. When he finally re-retired, Reece — a onetime contributor to *Entrepreneur* — needed something to keep him busy, so he volunteered with SCORE, a national nonprofit organization that offers workshops and free mentoring to small businesses.

“It’s very fun and rewarding,” he said.

Now the president of SCORE’s Upper Valley chapter, Reece enjoys advising area businesses owners. In the process, Reece gets to learn about interesting new businesses and ideas that he’d never even heard of. Because of that, “I’m actually engaging at cocktail parties,” he joked.

Reece has worked for and mentored family businesses, and he’s close with the owners of a fourth-generation family machine shop. He gets the strength of a family business — the trust that comes from working with family, the long-term investments a business might make when planning for the next generation — but he cautions that generational businesses also present their own pitfalls.

“Family businesses are tough to manage,” Reece said. “They’re fragile. Then, when you’re passing it down from one generation to the next, it adds to the fragility.”

As families grow through marriage or having children, more people become involved in the business, and that can increase the potential for conflicts over who makes what decisions, who spends more time working and who takes more of the benefits.

In a typical corporation, Reece explained, there are rules prohibiting relatives from working in the same department or even at the same company that are meant to avoid such conflicts.

“But with a family, you can’t disown a family member, so to speak. That’s the fragility,” he said.

Statistics compiled by SCORE say that 30 percent of family businesses successfully transition from the first generation to the second; only 12 percent make it to the third generation.

Reece is skeptical of these oft-cited statistics, which are derived from a 1980s study, thinking they sounded too high. “I would have thought as our world changes and businesses are really changing exponentially now, that really speeds up the failures,” he said.

Pramodita Sharma, a professor at the University of Vermont’s Grossman School of Business who studies family businesses, also pokes holes in those

statistics. In an article she wrote for FFI Practitioner, an online publication about family businesses, Sharma noted that a family enterprise can control, start and stop multiple businesses throughout the generations. The survival of a single firm does not always equal a family enterprise’s longevity.

Sharma also suggested that with people living longer lives, there can be more opportunities for generational businesses to develop. Of course, that may require extra planning.

In *Entrepreneurs in Every Generation: How Successful Family Businesses Develop Their Next Leaders*, a 2016 book she co-authored, Sharma found that successful generational businesses regularly develop career plans for family members.

“With careers spanning 40 to 50 years these days, thinking in terms of chapters of an adult career with each phase spanning 10 to 15 years works well for family enterprises,” Sharma said in an email.



Both Sharma and Reece cautioned against overgeneralizing family enterprises, as businesses — generational or otherwise — can be so different from one another. One thing is for certain, Reece said: “Eventually they all fail, right?”

Reece said the biggest mistake generational businesses can make is to try to shoehorn in one of the children to take over when they’re not equipped to do so.

“You really have to have an honest buy-in by the next generation,” he said. “And somehow arrange it so if they don’t want to take it over, that’s OK.”

But having worked for a number of entrepreneurs, Reece understands the desire for people who start businesses to want them to continue after they’re gone. “In a way, it’s their baby,” he said.

GILBERTE INTERIORS

One of Aharon Boghosian’s first jobs working for Gilberte Interiors, the family business his parents began out of their house more than 50 years ago, was making drapery rods after he got home from school. He was 11 years old.

“You started at the bottom of the totem pole,” he said. “Whatever needed to get done, got done.”

Today, Boghosian and his sister, Cheryl Boghosian, co-own the interior design business, which is located in downtown Hanover. But that doesn’t always mean he gets to escape the more mundane tasks, such as cleaning up the showrooms or shoveling snow in front of the store. As is common with successful family businesses, the employees work

long hours and don’t stop until the work is finished — even if that work is a full wastebasket.

Boghosian’s parents set the example. Gilberte and Antranig “Andy” Boghosian began work before their kids got up to go to school, and they worked into the night. At the time, Andy Boghosian spent his days as an engineer at Split Ball Bearing, and he’d bring home engineer friends to tackle projects after work, doing whatever it took to help the business succeed.

As the business grew, expanding from fabrics to home furnishings and design services, so did their need for space. Gilberte Interiors slowly took over their Hanover location until they had the opportunity to buy the building, with its 20,000 square feet divided among furniture displays, fabric libraries, a workshop and office space. Its bath, kitchen and cabinet showroom is being updated this year.

When it comes to hiring, Boghosian said they look for people who will fit into the family business for the long term. A couple of Gilberte Interior’s employees have been with the company for more than 20 years. One has been around for 40 years.

“When we hire an employee, they’re part of our family — whether they like it or not!” Boghosian joked.

After college, he and his sister struck out on their own for a time, as many children of generational businesses seem to do.

“My sister and I were both encouraged to spend time away from the family business,” he said.

Left: Fabric samples hang on the wall at Gilberte Interiors in Hanover. Below: Gilberte Boghosian started a drapery and upholstery business more than 50 years ago with her husband, Antranig, and they gradually grew into doing design services and offering custom fabrics and furniture.



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Boghosian took a job with one of the store's window treatment vendors, who was impressed by how much of their product Gilberte Interiors sold. Boghosian rose through the ranks, spending about a decade away from the business.

But as he was considering solid job offers in big cities like Phoenix and Chicago, his parents were getting older and thinking about their future. There was a family meeting. Were the kids interested in taking over Gilberte Interiors, or should they look at selling?

"I had to make a decision," Boghosian said, and once he committed to the family business, he's never looked back.

His sister returned soon after he did, along with her husband, Neil Roth. With everyone working together, "we could do a lot more things," Boghosian said, and the business really took off.

The fusion of his mother's sense of fabric and fashion with his father's engineering and design expertise is what really made Gilberte Interiors special, Boghosian said. The store also prides itself in maintaining a workshop to create custom soft goods.

"You end up with a much better product as a result," he said.

Andy Boghosian died in 2017, but the decades of experience that he and his wife have shared with the next generation still make a difference at Gilberte Interiors.

Thanks to that legacy, "we look at products differently," Boghosian said, ensuring their designs will be functional as well as attractive. "When I'm talking to a client, I can hear Dad."

Like any father and son, the two butted heads occasionally on how to approach projects. "I've quit as many times as he's fired me," Boghosian said.

But they never differed on the overall vision for Gilberte Interiors. "We've always wanted to go the same way, and we're very fortunate that way," he said.

Gilberte Boghosian still comes into work every day, following her early morning swim workout at the River Valley Club. Reflecting on a life of long hours spent building a business, she said she's happy that she got to spend a lot of time with her family, even if it much of it took place at work.

"It was just part of life, and there was not much we could do," she said.

When Gilberte Boghosian suggested that they were able to keep business and family matters separate, Roth, who handles the business side of Gilberte Interiors, jumped in with a contrary opinion. "We talk about it all the time," he said, smiling.

Gilberte Boghosian laughed, though she didn't deny it. "We have fun together," she said.

Her only real regret is not having had more time to travel with her husband, a famously social man who stood out even in an outgoing family. But she's proud of how her kids have taken over the business.

Long-term clients also are happy to have family members stepping in to continue Gilberte Interiors, a generational business advantage.

"It's been wonderful," she said of her children taking over the business: "They're doing fantastic."



Aharon and Cheryl Boghosian each have two grown children out in the world, but Aharon Boghosian isn't sure whether any of them have the desire to run the business.

"They're all doing really well," he said, which is the most important thing for the Boghosian family. And if they never come back to push Gilberte Interiors into a third generation, it's OK with him. "We've done our job."

JAKE'S QUECHEE MARKET

As manager of Jake's Quechee Market in Quechee, James Kerrigan enjoys having a clear mission of serving his customers' needs and wants.

"And we get feedback on that every day," Kerrigan said. If something sells, his customers must want it. If it doesn't, then he needs to make adjustments.

The 8,000-square-foot store and deli has been open for more than five years, but the place still looks new. The ceilings are high, making the space feel airy. There are aisles of basic groceries and locally grown produce, as well as plenty of prepared foods and a good-sized deli counter.

Jake's Quechee Market also sells hardware and household goods, firewood and pellet sacks, and features a wine aisle and a beer "cave" — a walk-in cooler filled with different kinds of brews.

Kerrigan calls it a modern general store — more than just a convenience mart, and with a connection to the community it serves. He's been around these kind of operations most of his life. His father, Ed Kerrigan, started the Jake's Market & Deli chain of stores, and though James Kerrigan never officially worked there, he remembers washing windows before he was a teen.

When it's a family business, the line between work and home is never very clear, Kerrigan noted. Indeed, it can take some effort to separate the two during family dinners or holiday gatherings.

"You have to be a little bit considerate of where those boundaries are," he said.

Last year, Ed Kerrigan sold the other Jake's Market & Deli stores to his business partner, and both father and son agree that Jake's Quechee Market isn't simply a continuation of that operation.

There are no gas pumps out front, which Ed Kerrigan said might make customers think of the market as just a gas station,

and Kerrigan has focused on bringing in local produce to a place where you have to drive several miles to the nearest grocery store.

"I feel like it's something new," Kerrigan said.

Kerrigan started out working as a consultant post college. After four years, his father approached him to see if he was interested in helping to run the new market in Quechee.

At first, he thought it would be for a limited time, and even his father told him he didn't want it to become a life sentence.

"And here we are, five years later," Kerrigan said.

Though he grew up in the Upper Valley and graduated from Hanover High School, Kerrigan had moved to Burlington after college, and that's where he still lives with his wife and young son. It's a long commute.

When he and his father first launched the market, James Kerrigan spent a lot of time in Quechee. Today, he can spend a few days a week working from home, and when he's stuck late at the store, he knows he always has a warm place to sleep.

"My parents are nice enough to let me crash in their basement," he said.

Kerrigan said he can't imagine trying to start something like Jake's Quechee Market without leaning on his father's experience and expertise. As a new father himself, Kerrigan has "a tremendous amount of respect" for his father's accomplishments in starting Jake's Market & Deli stores when he had a young family.

The years Kerrigan has spent working with his father have been an education. While many of his peers went back to school to pursue a business degree, James jokes that "I chose a slightly more affordable 'Kerrigan MBA' program." There's the occasional tension that comes with working with family, especially a parent, but overall Kerrigan said it's been a rewarding experience.

Ed Kerrigan agreed there is a learning curve in working with family. Turning over responsibility in a family business means that one person can't make all the decisions anymore.

"It's a challenge," he said. "That's why it doesn't always work."

However, he said he's impressed with what James has done with the Quechee

Seamstress Debbie Frazier, left, is the third generation of women in her family making custom slip covers at Gilberte Interiors. She took over for her mother, who was a seamstress for the company. Cheryl Boghosian checks in with Frazier in Hanover.

market.

"It's been really wonderful," Ed Kerrigan said of working with his son.

Early on, Kerrigan was sensitive about feeling like he'd been handed the position of managing the market. But he's worked as hard as he could to prove that he was worthy of this opportunity.

"I'm amazed, I'm impressed," Ed Kerrigan said of his son's diligence. And "he likes what he's doing. He likes being part of the community" and dealing with area vendors.

If Kerrigan could offer advice to other generational businesses, he'd echo his counterpart at Dan & Whit's about being above board when it comes to financial matters. Clear discussions about the family business is important for everyone involved, he said.

Kerrigan also appreciates that in a generational family business, the other person has your back and looks out for your interests. "You really don't have to question that," he said.

Ed Kerrigan may have sold his chain of stores, but he remains involved in the new operations. Last summer, father and son opened Squechee Clean, a car wash and laundromat just down the street from the market. It's a seemingly odd combination, but Kerrigan explained the community needed a laundromat, and that washing clothes and cars both require a big boiler.

And coming up in February, the Burlington-based chain Skinny Pancake is expected to permanently move into the 2,000-square-foot cafe area attached to the market.

Hiring remains an issue, especially over the past year or so. The market typically has between 12 to 20 employees, and being a generational business doesn't help them find more.

"It's just hard to hire people," Kerrigan said.

Lately, Kerrigan has been planning a new market project closer to home — and with a shorter commute. "That's going to make it harder for me to be involved here day to day," he said.

While his father owns Jake's Quechee Market and Squechee Clean, Kerrigan will own this new project, though his father will remain involved. His father's years of experience are a valuable asset Kerrigan is not ready to let go of.

During an interview at the market, lights in the still-closed restaurant area went out, silencing the fans and the buzz of electrical appliances. When you're working in a family business, there's never a dull moment.

Kerrigan stood up and prepared to address the lack of power. "I guess I need to get back to work," he said. **E**

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES M. PATTERSON