

For these Fleming Alumni...

Business is 'All in the Family'

Family businesses in Canada have a 1.3 trillion dollar impact on our economy each year. Accounting for 60% of our gross domestic product and employing approximately 35% of our workforce, they are present in every industry. For many, Fleming College is the training ground where the necessary skills are developed to help them succeed in carrying on the family tradition and contributing to the overall culture and economic health of our communities.

Four alumni, Kathy Perry (Business Administration - Marketing, '84) and her brother Terry Harris (Electro-Mechanical Engineering - Robotics, '80), of Harco Enterprises Ltd, Stephen Elmhirst (Chef Training - Advanced, '08), of Elmhirst's Resort and Drew Merrett (Business Administration - Marketing, '88) of Merrett Home Hardware shared their stories of what it is like to grow up with and eventually work in the family business.

Kathy Perry and Terry Harris can't remember a time when HARCO Enterprises wasn't a part of their family. Their parents Ray and Joan Harris began the injection moulding manufacturing company, when Kathy was only 2 years old. The business was built, literally from the ground up, starting in the basement of their family home. The business has since grown into a 22 employee operation boasting a 16,000 square foot machine shop. HARCO provides sanitary processing equipment for the pharmaceutical, food, dairy and beverage processing industries. HARCO also has a plastics division which creates a full line of custom and standard plastic items, fulfilling the needs of the promotional products industry.

As youth, Terry and Kathy both worked for their parents, sweeping floors by age eight and eventually spending their summers as teenagers working full time in the machine shop. As they got older however their father did not insist that they plan for a career at HARCO. "His philosophy was that it was important to get out of the family business and get other experience, see how other operations worked and then make a decision," explains Terry. He spent his summers through college working at General Motors. Kathy first enrolled in Fashion Merchandising and then enrolled in the Marketing diploma program. Kathy relocated for a short time with her husband to pursue other interests... both did eventually return, working their way up through the ranks of



Stephen Elmhirst of Elmhirst's Resort

the family company. Kathy is now the Vice President of Marketing and Finance and Terry is the Corporate Vice President.

Drew Merrett had a similar experience; Home Hardware was always a part of his family. Originally, their father owned a Home Hardware in Toronto. When Drew and his brother were quite young their father purchased the Simcoe Street Home Hardware so the family moved from the 'big city' and relocated to the Kawarthas. Drew also swept floors and spent weekends and summers stocking shelves and serving customers. After graduating from Fleming, Drew's original plans were not to return to the family business. Drew worked for a while in construction and then in advertising at a local newspaper. During this time, one of his duties included overseeing the classified ads. While confirming the want ads one particular day Drew came across an ad for a manager at his father's store. Drew prepared his resume and applied. He was interviewed by another manager and was eventually hired from a pool including several other candidates. With his father now retired, Drew is the sole proprietor of the business.

Stephen Elmhirst's experience was a little bit different; the expectation to pitch in, even from a young age was clear for him and his brother Greg. For Stephen's family there was no separation between business and family life. "We lived at the Resort; our grandparents lived at the Resort. We could be eating dinner and the service bell would ring and we would stop eating to take care of a guest. It's just the way it was in the early days." Stephen and his brother also got to meet children from all over the world. Each week new vacationers would come to the Resort, "sometimes we'd rope them into helping with our chores", Stephen laughs.

After high school Stephen chose a very different career path. He worked for several years as a jail guard at Warkworth Institution and then moved on to become an Air Traffic Controller in Toronto. Both very high stress careers, they taught Stephen how to handle intense pressure and to be quick thinking in an emergency. These skills would serve him well when he decided to leave the Toronto "rat race" and return home. Wanting to contribute to the family business and give his children the same opportunities he had growing up, he looked for a fit in the Resort. In need of more help in the restaurant, Stephen decided that becoming a chef would not only help out the family business, but would allow him to pursue his interests in culinary arts. With



Kathy Perry and her brother Terry Harris of Harco Enterprises Ltd

an inherent understanding of pressure, he was already halfway there! Taking advice from former Elmhurst Chef and Fleming College faculty member, David Hawey, Stephen completed his chef training. He has since completed his "Red Seal" certification and creates delicious offerings for the guests at Elmhurst.

Working in a family business is a unique experience for everyone, but there are always common threads. "Business is always on the agenda at family gatherings. It's normal to us, we've never known anything different," says Kathy. "Your commitment is different", says Terry. "You're not just working for yourself but for a greater purpose; for the benefit of your entire family."

Drew agrees, "Your dedication is much greater, it's not just your job, it's your family's future." Tight knit families and a sense of mutual respect and understanding are definitely bonuses to a family business. "You have to believe in everyone else's job, and they have to believe in yours," says Stephen, "you always have to be a team player."

For all the pros, there are occasional cons. "It's difficult to separate business and pleasure sometimes," states Terry. "We try, but it doesn't always work." Being the second generation can be tough. "To your parents, you're still a child. And as you get older, you want more responsibility," says Drew, "it can be difficult to prove that you are ready." Stephen agrees, "as a family member you are not always measured by the same yardstick as your co-workers. That's where working outside the business for a while



Drew Merrett of Merrett Home Hardware

Photo by Lance Anderson/Peterborough This Week

helps you to develop your skill sets".

So what about the next generation of these families? Will their children carry on the family tradition? Many of the next generation perform similar work to what their parents did as teens in a family business, but others choose to keep their own children at arms length from the business. All agree that there will not be pressure for their children to make a career at the family business if they don't want to. "We were encouraged to pursue our own dreams and I think our kids deserve that," says Kathy.

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