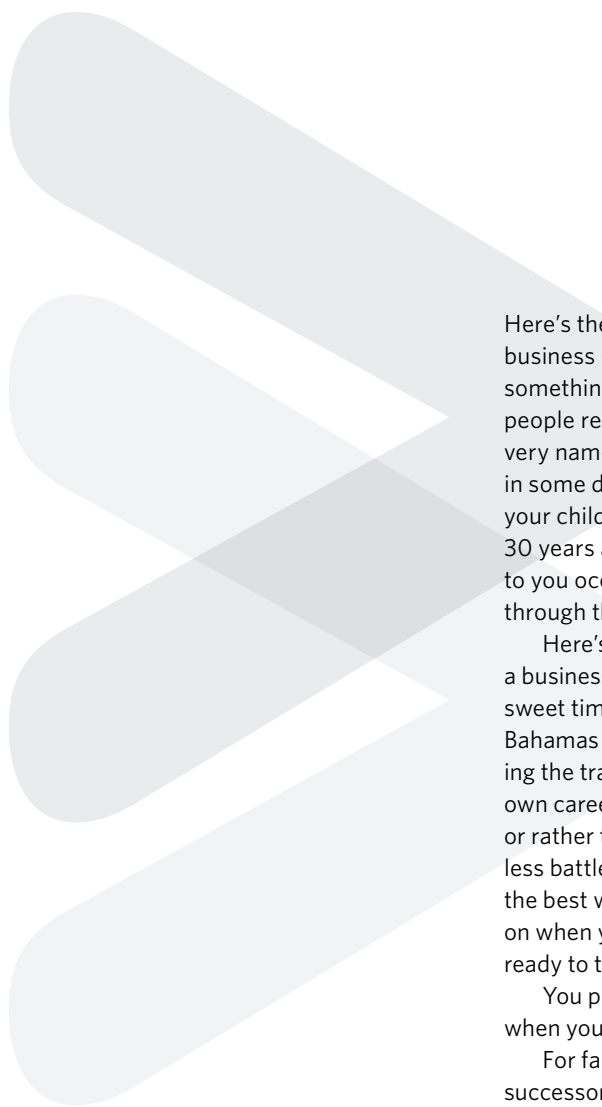


# MODERN FAMILY BUSINESS



Three family businesses overcome distance, tech challenges and tension to build a solid foundation for the next generation.

BY MARY  
WESTBROOK



Here's the dream of many small business owners: You start a business — or take it over from your own parents — and build something great. Beautiful, even. The business becomes a place people respect and trust — an institution in your town or city, its very name shorthand for excellent service and high quality. Then, in some distant, foggy future, you lovingly turn over your keys to your children, who embrace the role gratefully and spend the next 30 years adding to the solid foundation you created (while turning to you occasionally for sage advice while you sail your new boat through the Bahamas).

Here's the reality many small business owners face: You build a business you're proud of, through ups and downs, crises and sweet times. But when you're finally ready to retire (not quite to the Bahamas but someplace a little warmer), you realize how challenging the transition will be. Your children are happily invested in their own careers, which have nothing to do with your family business ... or rather than the dreamy handing off of keys, you're locked in endless battles with your daughter about the direction of the business, the best way to move forward ... or you find yourself ready to move on when your most obvious heir apparent is just 18 and far from ready to take over, maybe even far away from the business itself.

You poured your heart and your life into the business; what if, when you leave, no one else wants it?

For family business owners, the worry of having no obvious successor is a real and troubling concern. According to the Family Business Institute, only about 30 percent of family businesses survive into the second generation. Twelve percent are viable into the third generation, and just 3 percent operate into the fourth generation or beyond. In the floral industry, where the days are long, the pay is often low and the room for professional growth can sometimes be (or, at least, appear) limited, the challenges are even more acute: the industry is aging and young people — family members or not — are not exactly lining up for jobs in it.

This month, we talked to three successful floral industry family businesses that have overcome distance, intergenerational tension and technological trouble to find meaningful and lasting space for the next generation — putting themselves, their families and their businesses on firmer ground for the future.

**FAMILY TIME** Martin and Helene Meskers (center) didn't start their business with the expectation that their children would join it ... but they're glad they did. Pictured, left to right, are son-in-law, Landon Reese; daughter, Jacinth Reese; grandson Kason; granddaughter, Kamari; son, Tyler Meskers; and daughter-in-law Megan Meskers.



**DIGITAL NATIVE** When Tyler Meskers returned to his family's business, he helped usher in technological upgrades, including the use of mobile devices and tablets that have replaced paper and pen and streamlined operations in the greenhouses and beyond.



CHARLENE VOGEL

**"I knew that my experience growing up on the farm, and my many summers back home there, gave me a unique background." — Jacinth Reese**

ence they wouldn't have had if they'd stayed in Aurora.

The transition began when Martin and Helene set about looking for a new sales team member in 2011, without much luck. They needed someone who had deep knowledge of Oregon Flowers and the ability to see issues from a customer's point of view. After her job in New York (and thanks to her childhood on the farm), Jacinth had those qualifications — and was ready for a new challenge professionally — but one major obstacle stood in the way: By that time, she lived in Boise, Idaho, with her husband, and Oregon Flowers had no experience with telecommuting workers. Martin, in particular, was concerned that the 500-mile distance was simply too much.

"I had some real reservations," he said. "At first, I thought, 'No. She needs to be here with everyone else, with the flowers.'"

Talking through the logistics of the remote setup helped bring Martin on board. In the end, he and Helene initiated a tech overhaul that streamlined operations so that Jacinth could access necessary information safely and consistently from Boise. The upgrade, which included the introduction of tablets and electronic devices for tasks previously completed on pads of paper, means that all team members now have real-time information at their fingertips — a boon for everyone, said Martin, who said the team now works more efficiently on myriad aspects, including sales, production and packing.

To ensure that Jacinth stays updated on farm activity and tied into the staff, the family also agreed that she would visit Oregon Flowers about every six weeks. She usually makes the trip with her own children — Kamari, 3, and Kason, 11 months — in tow (to the delight of proud grandparents Helene and Martin.) Those

## THE SECOND GENERATION COMES HOME

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**The Longevity Hurdle:** The next generation isn't interested in joining the business.

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**The Long View Solution:** Give them space, keep planning on your own — and don't be surprised by the occasional change of heart.

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➤ Because Martin and Helene Meskers set out on their own in the late 1970s, leaving Holland for the United States, they didn't expect their children to automatically pick up the banner for Oregon Flowers, the business the pair started together in Aurora, Ore.

"We both come from a long line of entrepreneurs, so I don't think that when we started out we necessarily assumed we were starting a 'family business,' meaning something our children would want to be part of," said Martin, SAF's president-elect. "We just saw an opportunity to try something new ourselves, and we went for it."

Indeed, of their three children — Jacinth Reese, 29, Tyler, 26, and Claire, 23 — only Tyler displayed an early interest in growing flowers, and, like his parents, he seemed intent on forging

his own way: In high school, he worked for a local vineyard supply company and briefly traveled to Chile to help with a lily bulb harvest.

For her part, Jacinth, 29, "deliberately" put a continent between herself and the family business. After she graduated from Santa Clara University, she moved to New York and worked for a high-end florist and event company. "I wanted to get away for a little while, and my thinking was, if I put this much space between us, I can't go back," she said with a laugh.

With Jacinth and Tyler on their own and Claire, the baby, on track to study history in college, Martin and Helene were faced with an all-too-common reality: no definite next-generation for their business. Instead of trying to pull, beg or bribe their kids to come back home, however, the pair focused on growing their business (from three team members in 1985 to 25 today) and keeping it healthy. They recruited new talent, promoted longtime employees to key positions and sought outside expertise on growing techniques and technologies.

Then, about four years ago, a funny thing happened. The kids — two of them, at least — came home, bringing with them a wealth of knowledge and experi-

visits are complemented by daily interactions via text, phone and email.

"I knew that my experience growing up on the farm, and my many summers back home there, gave me a unique background," Jacinth said. "Now, going back home every six weeks, I get to see my own kids running around, like I did. It's like déjà vu, in the best possible way."

In 2012, after working for a lily breeder in Holland, Tyler also returned to Oregon Flowers. He quickly leveraged his experience abroad to help his family build a new greenhouse range that includes state-of-the-art harvest belts, bunching lines, along with heating and irrigation systems. He's also introduced the farm to new lily varieties and streamlined operations, allowing the sales team to receive more up-to-date data and also more accurately forecast upcoming crop availability in the greenhouses.

Perhaps even more important, "his enthusiasm and youth were things that we, within the business, really needed after 25 years," Martin said. "Since the kids only started joining the business four years ago, we're still at the beginning of this journey, a family business. But it's nice to imagine the business continuing, that it's something we built and that our kids now feel passionate about."

And so far, that passion seems on track to carry the business forward for years to come. Recently, with an eye toward succession planning, Martin and Helene have introduced two annual family meetings, one for family members who are active in the business and one that includes Claire, along with Jacinth's husband, Landon, and Tyler's wife, Megan.

"At those meetings, Helene and I stress what we would like to see happen in our family and our business in the future, but we try mostly to keep the communication lines open," Martin said. "It's a work in progress."

#### Meskers' Words of Wisdom

To prevent bad feelings between family and non-family members, make sure that if you welcome your adult children into the business, you're doing so because they have skills and experience that will benefit your business — or the potential to develop them. "Fortunately, we didn't have any bad feelings when the kids came back," Martin said. "A lot of our employees watched them grow up, so there's already a feeling of closeness. But both Jacinth and Tyler came back with real skills and ideas that we needed and could put into action. In that sense, their time away was good for all of us."

## THE FAMILIES



CHARLENE VOGEL

### Oregon Flowers Inc.

Aurora, Ore.

Second Generation

**Active Family Members:** Martin and Helene Meskers (founders), daughter Jacinth Reese (sales), son Tyler Meskers (operations manager)

**Family Motto:** You gotta be you. If you have children who want to try their own career path, encourage the impulse — you never know where life will take them, or when it might lead them back home. After striking out on their own in their early twenties, "both Jacinth and Tyler came back to us with new ideas, new skills," Martin said, "and also, really, a new appreciation for how we do things here."



KELLY DAVIDSON

### Central Square Florist

Cambridge, Mass.

Fourth Generation

**Active Family Members:** David Levine and his daughter, Jackie, a college junior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Family Motto:** Work-family divide ... what work-family divide? Both Jackie and David laugh at the idea that shop issues should remain in-store. Instead, they're happy to talk shop around the dinner table (to the occasional chagrin of David's wife, Terry, and younger daughter, Michelle, neither of whom is active in the business.) "I sometimes worry about that [aspect of the job] as a dad, I guess — you know, this is a hard business, long hours," David said. "But I grew up in a family that talked about the business all the time. Now, with email and cell phones, Jackie and I probably do it even more."



JIM JUDKIS

### Neubauer's Flowers

Uniontown, Pa.

Fourth Generation

**Active Family Members:** Steve and Roberta Neubauer, along with their son Joey

**Family Motto:** Find common ground. Steve and Joey may have argued (sometimes publicly) in the past, but their love for the business and shared work ethic have brought them together. "It used to be that I was the first to arrive and the last to leave," Steve said. "That's not always the case anymore."





**FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE** Jackie Levine, 21, says she always knew she wanted to join the family business, working alongside her father, David. Today, she handles the shop's website, social media presence and online marketing from her dorm room.

KELLY DAVIDSON

## COLLEGE KID **URNS MARKETING MASTER**

**“Jackie is closer in age to the brides ... She looks and dresses like them, and they respond to that.” — David Levine**

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**The Longevity Hurdle:** The current generation is overloaded — and the next generation is 90 miles away.

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**The Long View Solution:** Embrace technology. Reimagine which jobs “must” be done in-store.

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> Call it a double whammy. Within the last four years, David Levine’s parents — his mother, Sandra, and his father, Myron — retired from the family’s fourth-generation business, Central Square Florist in Cambridge, Mass. Their decision to leave wasn’t unexpected, and the timing was right for the couple, but the departures added work to David’s already overburdened days, at a time when he didn’t have a right-hand man.

“For most of their careers, both my parents used to work seven days a week,” David said. Even as they scaled back their commitments, “I had them to rely on — to talk about daily issues with.” When they retired, he lost that important sounding board, too.

Fortunately, David did have a right-hand gal, in the form of his daughter, Jackie, except that around the time that Sandra and Myron were moving on, Jackie was moving into her freshman dorm at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Yet it never occurred to Jackie, 21, who started working in the flower shop as a kid and grew up relishing the dinnertime talks about the business, to stop working there, even though her campus is about 90 miles from the shop and David had never before employed an off-site worker. If anything, as Jackie watched her dad take on more around

the business, she became increasingly engaged — learning, in particular, about online marketing and just how much she could contribute right away, from far away.

“Actually, I can do a lot of things remotely,” said Jackie, who is on track to graduate, early, with a degree in sociology sometime in the next year. “I can access RTI, review the day’s orders, manage the website, communicate with staff. I even take calls in my dorm room for the shop after hours.”

Jackie also led the charge on a website overhaul in 2013. At that time, she and David changed from a template-based main site to a more custom version (created through FlowerManager, an enterprise-level e-commerce engine developed by GravityFree, out of Sarasota, Fla.). The change has helped increase web sales by 121 percent, thanks in part to “improved design, better organization of products and a more user-friendly online experience,” according to Jackie.

Along with SEO, search marketing and email, GravityFree also now manages the business’s overall presence across social media platforms, including blog posts and updates to sites such as Google+, Facebook, and Twitter — all of which Jackie oversees, from her dorm room during the semester and from the shop on weekends and during breaks.



KELLY DAVIDSON

**TIME MANAGEMENT** By investing in technology that allows his 21-year-old daughter to work for the business from her college campus, David Levine has more time to spend on daily shop operations. The remote work setup is something he recommends to any florist with a motivated college-aged child.

(Those efforts seem to be paying off: Since 2013, traffic to the company’s website, which is often where social media friends and followers are directed, is up 34 percent.)

“I give my dad a lot of credit because he created our [social media] accounts years ago, but he didn’t really have the time to manage them” and balance his many other roles in the business, Jackie said. By putting Jackie in charge, and giving her the power to outsource some of those responsibilities, the shop has seen a dramatic increase in engagement on social media. One benchmark: They had several hundred Facebook followers before Jackie took over. At press time, they had 4,600-plus.

“When I was younger, I wanted to be a florist like my dad because I looked up to him and wanted to do everything he did,” Jackie said. “As I got older, I wanted to join the family business because I saw how much of an asset I am to my dad. I saw how hard he works and knew he needed me.”

Jackie’s post-college plans “definitely” involve the family business, and David said he’s already looking for ways to keep his high-achieving daughter challenged, including deepening her role in purchasing and delivery routing. Lately, she’s also been taking over more of the shop’s wedding consultations when she’s in the store on weekends, a segment that seems like an ideal fit, according to David.

“Jackie is closer in age to the brides, and obviously she’s a woman,” he said. “She looks and dresses like them, and they respond to that.”

#### Levines’ Words of Wisdom

If you have an adult child who is motivated to work with you, but can’t be in the shop every day, find a way to make it happen. Technology is making such arrangements easier every year, and sometimes the main holdup is an outdated mindset (e.g., everyone has to be here, all the time, to get the job done). “So much can be done remotely,” David said. “Honestly, I recommend it to anyone with college kids.”



KELLY DAVIDSON

**THE NATURAL** “Jackie has a great way with customers on the phone,” said David Levine, who is hoping to deepen his daughter’s role in the shop’s wedding business in the coming years. After hours, Jackie can take customer calls from her dorm room.

## MORE ONLINE: RESOURCES TO GO

Inspired by some of the families featured in this month’s story? We have practical resources to help you get started, including:

**Remote Work Starter Kit.** Floral industry members and SAF CIO Renato Sogueco weigh in on the types of industry jobs that can be done remotely, and the technology you’ll need to empower those employees. [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline)

**Succession Success.** Don’t be intimidated by succession planning — be ready for it with top questions and tips to get started on the process. [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline)

**Millennial Know-How.** Struggling to make the next generation feel more at home? It may be a question of your management style. Read more about what young employees are looking for at work, and how to bring out the best in them, in the December 2014 issue of *Floral Management*. [safnow.org/floralmanagement](http://safnow.org/floralmanagement)

— M.W.





**MEN AT WORK**  
Open-heart surgery helped Steve Neubauer learn to delegate more, and to rely increasingly on his 28-year-old son, Joey

JIM JUDKIS

## FROM FAMILY FIGHTS TO FINELY TUNED MACHINE

**“In the past, we’d make those disagreements a little more public ... probably more public than we should have.” — Steve Neubauer**

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**The Longevity Hurdle:** Two generations are butting heads.

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**The Long View Solution:** Recognize the other’s strengths. Communicate. (And keep arguments behind closed doors — or try to.)

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> Twelve years ago, when Joey Neubauer told his dad, Steve, that he was ready to join the family business full time, Steve’s heart sank.

Joey had just finished a semester of college and Steve hoped his son would stay on that course — studying business, maybe going out on his own. Having grown up in the floral industry, the third-generation owner of Neubauer’s Flowers in Uniontown, Pa.,

knew how grueling the work could be ... and he also knew how strong-willed both he and his son were. Would they even survive working together?

“We used to have [big] disagreements,” said Joey, 28. “There were times when I wouldn’t listen, or he wouldn’t really understand what I was saying.”

One particularly memorable exchange occurred in 2005 during Valentine’s Day. Joey had just taken over dispatching responsibilities and wanted to introduce new ways of doing things. Steve resisted those ideas and the two had it out, in front of their staff.

The situation was far from ideal, said Steve, noting that such spats were vexing to his wife, Roberta, who also works in the business, and they were not exactly conducive to staff morale or beneficial for the overall business environment.

“In the past, we’d make those disagreements a little more public,” he said, “probably more public than we should have.”

Those days are behind them now, thanks in part to an unasked-for “light bulb moment”: in 2008, in an unsettling instance of history almost repeating itself, Steve underwent open-heart surgery. Steve’s own father, Richard, died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 59, the same year the family opened its location in Uniontown (the business started in Cameron, W.V.). At 21, Steve had become the overwhelmed owner of two retail flower shops — and all the stress those businesses entailed.

After his own surgery, Steve made the commitment to ensure that Joey had a real voice in more aspects of the business. “It was a turning point for me,” Steve said. “I started delegating more.”

Since then, Joey has taken over complicated portions of the business, including delivery, where he streamlined and updated operations by pulling from the best practices he’d collected



JIM JUDKIS

**UP AND COMER** Since taking a higher profile role in the family business, Joey Neubauer has streamlined delivery operations, taking best practices and lessons learned over his 12 years in the business and improving overall service.

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over the last decade, watching other team members in the job. He's also become more involved in receiving and warehousing responsibilities.

More recently, he's started working toward a real estate license to complement the Neubauers' non-floral expansion efforts. In 2014, they purchased two buildings (a former schoolhouse and a one-time government building) through a local school district auction, and plan to renovate both, renting space in one building to complementary businesses (think: coffee shop, landscape architect) while transforming the other into a venue for small events. (Steve and Roberta's younger son, Robert, a civil engineer, is also helping in these efforts, which the Neubauers expect to start design and engineering work in the third quarter of 2015.)

This latest move ties in with their long-term vision of the company as something more than "just" a flower store and, instead, a lifestyle brand.

Today, Steve, who initially tried to discourage his son from joining the business, can't imagine life without him. "He's really stepped it up, and I've become more open-minded," Steve said. "Now, I really feel like we're on the cusp of great things."

#### Neubauers' Words of Wisdom

Start planning for succession. While Steve admits their own efforts to formalize succession planning are "very much a work in progress," he understands the importance of communicating with family and having a plan: He still remembers how anxious he felt after his own father's death. "That's too much responsibility to leave on anyone," he said. "We're starting to have those conversations now." 🌿

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