

# BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

Can a longtime family business make the most of a major urban revitalization effort?

BY MARY WESTBROOK  
RANDAL CROW PHOTOGRAPHY



Progress isn't hard to spot lately in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. Co-owner and vice president of Norton's Florist, Cameron Pappas, CPA, sees it every day. There's Railroad Park, the eight-block public green space that opened in 2010, and Innovation Depot, a new startup space already hosting dozens of businesses — not to mention the bustling, expanding research hub surrounding the University of Alabama-Birmingham.

**SIGHTS SET ON GROWTH**

Figuring out how Norton's can capitalize on a 58 percent increase in millennials living in downtown Birmingham is a top priority for Cameron Pappas, CPA, of Norton's Florist.

The truth is, though, Cameron doesn't have to head to those sites to see growth in his hometown. With 300 residential apartment units currently under construction within a two-block radius of Norton's main store, Cameron only has to step through the shop's front door to see Birmingham bursting with new life.

According to the real estate web site Curbed.com, Birmingham has seen a 58 percent residential increase downtown among 24- to 35-year-olds — a growth rate three times the national average. Over the last decade, Alabama has invested serious cash in Birmingham's downtown revival, to the tune of \$240 million in development incentives. That money has translated into new civic projects, businesses and hundreds of residential areas, just like the ones popping up around Norton's.

For Cameron, 28, and his father, Gus, 70, Birmingham's downtown revival comes at a fortuitous time. Gus purchased the 96-year-old business in 2001, when Cameron was in middle school, and ushered it through the Great Recession, making operations more efficient and streamlined. In October 2015,

after a three-year stint as an accountant, Cameron joined the family business — a role he took on joyfully.

Now, the two are at a crossroads: As downtown Birmingham grows and changes before their eyes, what can the Pappas do to recreate and revitalize a business founded in the 1920s, one that's done well in recent years but could use some updating and refreshing now? How can they make Norton's the go-to flower shop for all these incoming residents (not only millennials, but downsizing boomers) and new businesses? And, as Gus's floral career enters a new phase and Cameron's career takes off, how can father and son work together to create a future for the business that both capitalizes on its history and makes way for new opportunities?

### COME TOGETHER, RIGHT NOW

Cameron was 12 when Gus purchased Norton's; prior to that Gus had been the chief financial officer for a large chain of retail jewelry stores. Cameron worked in Norton's through high school, processing and delivering flowers and completing other entry-level tasks — and he knew

from a young age that this life was the life for him.

Knowing the demands of life as a small-business owner, Gus, however, wasn't convinced.

"I wasn't sure that Norton's was what I wanted him to do," he admitted, so Gus encouraged his son to attend college first and work outside the family business.

Cameron did just that, earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees in accounting from Auburn University and taking a job in public accounting for three years, before joining Norton's full-time in 2015. Still, Cameron said he never took his eyes off the prize; he studied accounting because he knew that knowledge would benefit the business.

"Norton's was where I wanted to be, eventually," he said.

Two years ago, the two agreed the time was right, in part because Gus (who, it should be noted, is emphatically *not* retiring anytime soon) was ready for new ideas.

"I thought it was time that we added younger energy to the company in order to market to the millennial demographic," he said.

Cameron also was ready to put the lessons he'd learned in accounting to work for the business.

"In public accounting, I learned the groundwork for managing people and delegation," he said. "I also learned a lot about worth ethic and meeting deadlines. I worked a lot with my clients, one on one, so I also learned about customer interaction and customer service, making customers happy."

Soon after Gus invited Cameron to come aboard full-time, Cameron took over bookkeeping and accounting responsibilities, natural roles given his background. Last year, he expanded his job to include management aspects, including oversight of design and delivery, quality control and order flow. Cameron recently began buying into the business to become co-owner; he'll continue to buy stock over an agreed-upon time period.

Learning to work together has meant learning to appreciate each other's differences: Gus's deep knowledge of the business and experience running and managing retail businesses alongside Cameron's youthful energy and



### NORTON'S FLORIST BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

**Owners:** Gus and Cameron Pappas

**History:** Founded in 1921; purchased in 2001 by Gus Pappas, who reduced the number of locations from five to two.

**Annual sales:** \$2.7 million

**Sales trend:** 10 percent increase since 2015

**No. of employees:** 19 FT; 3 PT

**POS:** FTD Mercury

**No. of delivery vehicles:** 7

comfort with new tech and communication platforms. When they are working as a team — as they generally do today — those strengths complement each other. Gus's long experience provides context and a framework and Cameron brings a serious shot of adrenaline and a vision for Norton's future, much of which will depend on appealing to his millennial cohorts.

"I want Norton's to be 'the' go-to florist for the city of Birmingham," Cameron said. "Business is changing, and it's imperative that we stay on the forefront of that change. I understand my generation, and what my generation wants. Many boomers just don't get it."

He then added sheepishly, "That's so millennial of me to say, but I think it's true."

### A NEW LOOK FOR A NEW VISION

One thing Gus and Cameron were in agreement on from the beginning of their professional pairing: If the business was going to capitalize on the many positive changes to Birmingham's downtown, they'd need to be proactive and strategic about becoming the kind of business that embodied this new era for the city.

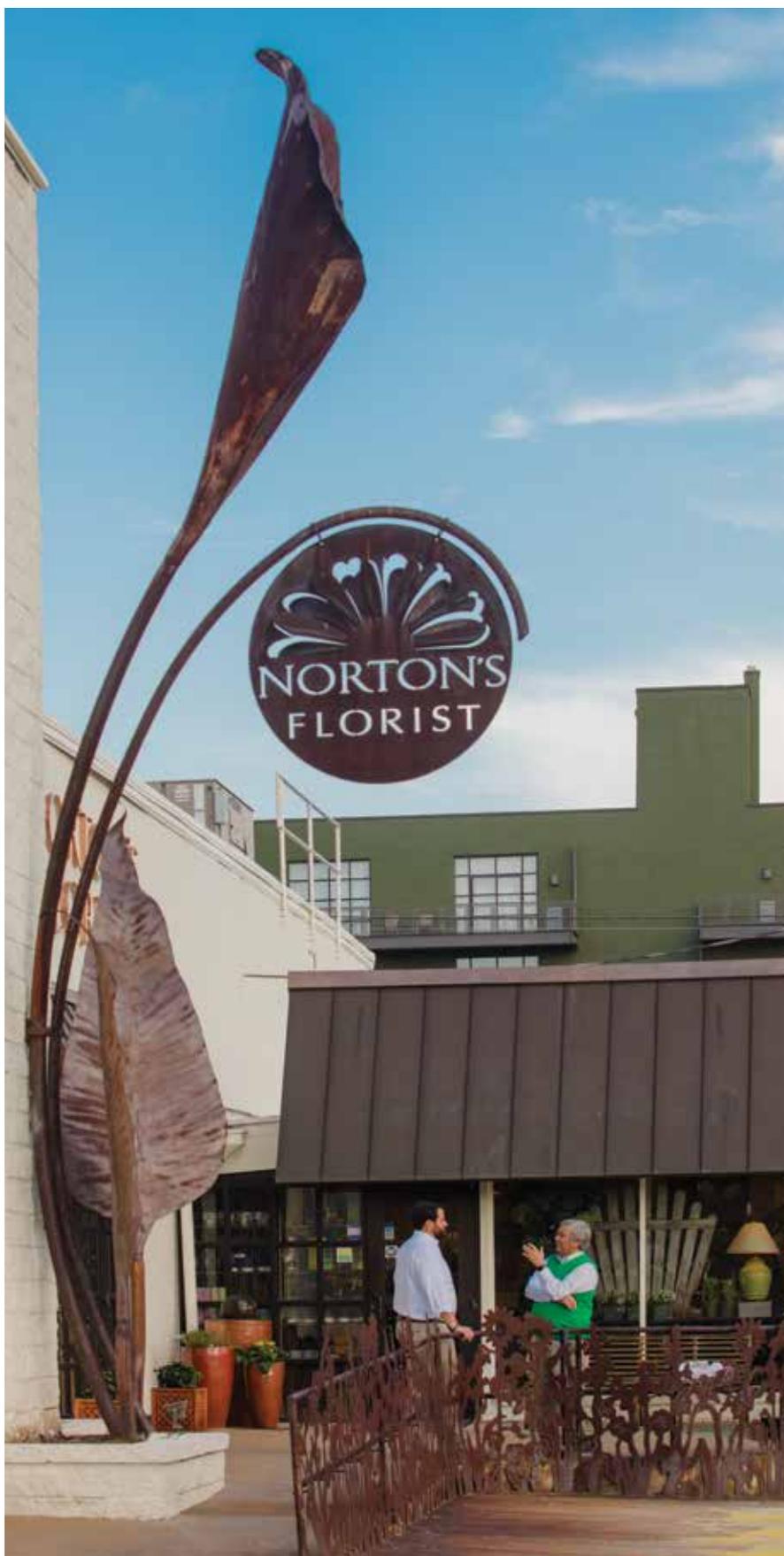
The potential was everywhere.

Complementing all of those new residential buildings filled with millennials and downsizing boomers are new restaurants and shops in renovated historic buildings.

"We can see all of this new construction, and it's all headed toward our Southside shop," Cameron said. "We're right on the edge of the revitalization."

Looking around the store's Southside location, however, Cameron and Gus decided that if they were going to make the most of the revitalization wave, they'd need to do some spiffing up of their own. The Southside location had served as the business's main location for more than a decade (another smaller shop is about one mile away in the city's business district). It provided space, 12,000 square feet, but not the kind of character Cameron knew millennial customers would be after. So, they came up with a plan, at press time still in its final stages before implementation, to revamp the showroom.

"Our showroom doesn't currently have a very good flow for customers, and, overall, it's just outdated," Cameron explained.



**WALK ON BY** Cameron and Gus Pappas already have seen an uptick in foot traffic to their main store; they are hoping some of their upcoming efforts will help draw in an even bigger crowd.

## PETAL IT FORWARD, WHY DON'T YA?



For Cameron Pappas, the decision to participate in the Society of American Florists' Petal It Forward event on October 11 was basically a no-brainer. The event overlaps with many of his own goals for Norton's Florist: Get into the community, give people something positive to say about flowers, make future connections.

Last year during Petal It Forward, the shop went to four different areas and even solicited the help of area police and firefighters. This year, Pappas and his father, Gus, are coordinating the launch of a new marketing initiative and the reveal of a major showroom overhaul with Petal It Forward. (In fact, they are planning to do multiple giveaways or "Bloom Blasts" in advance of the SAF event, in addition to participating in the nationwide giveaway on October 11.)

Participating in Petal It Forward has become a must-do event for many floral industry members, and SAF makes it easy to get started with planning and marketing materials available online and free to members. Check out more information and register your shop's events today at [safnow.org](http://safnow.org). (Remember, registering your shop ensures you'll be included in the comprehensive list of events SAF's marketing team distributes to media members in advance of the giveaway.) —M.W.



**THE CITY LIFE** Designer George Aplin works on a prototype of a design for Norton's Birmingham Collection, a series of designs named for landmarks around the city. The vase, made by a local company, includes the letters "BHM," the code for the local airport.

To appeal to trendy urbanites, Cameron and Gus have for months been working with a local architect on a new look, set to debut this fall. The renovation plans are extensive, but chief among the goals is to make the space more inviting to customers, including walk-in clients, who the Pappas expect to become more frequent as the downtown revitalization continues. In fact, they've already seen more walk-ins year-over-year at the location, Cameron said.

"All around downtown, we're seeing more and more people out and about, walking around, and we want to be part of that," he said. "Right now, customers are drawn out of the showroom as soon as they enter it."

Once the renovation is complete, the whole left side of the showroom, about 25 feet, will have adjustable shelving to display local products that we sell, as well as "containers of all shapes, colors and sizes," Cameron said.

The new space also will include three 6-foot display tables with space underneath for green plants. The first table will feature wrapped, to-go flowers ("to wow the customer upon entry," Cameron said). The second table will have cut flower designs and the third will focus on "desktop gift" ideas (orchids and small plants). The focal point of the much more open showroom will become the custom-built, 20-foot wide checkout area, complete with a concrete counter top, an expansive addition that provides employees with space to design, wrap and check out customers, with room left over for product displays.

"The new showroom will utilize the space up front much better than our current showroom, as well as a fresh updated feel," Cameron said.

The Pappas also repainted the exterior of the building from bright multi-colors (orange, red and green) to a sleek white, more in keeping with their updated brand, and they'll be adding Spanish cedar screens that will run down the entire west-facing window of the showroom (about 40 feet total). The renovation includes updates to the back of the store, too, including cubicles for the sales room, new carpet, acoustic absorbing panels and updated computers.



**PLOTTING THE FUTURE** Cameron and Gus Pappas review blueprints from a local architect for their renovated showroom, a project that will make the space more open while incorporating historic details of the longtime business.

As for the renovation budget, that's not something Cameron and Gus are disclosing, but they are willing to talk about how important it is to them to get the shop's look and feel right.

"We want to do whatever we have to in order to reach the newcomers of the city center," Cameron said, adding that they don't anticipate closing the business during the renovation —instead they can divert customers to their attached warehouse which has a temporary POS system.

"We want to create an oasis for people looking for fresh flowers and plants in the city center," he said. "We justify the expense by acknowledging our part of the renaissance in Birmingham."

## GET CIVIC MINDED

The best way to stay abreast of changes coming to your city? (Think: New developments, zoning changes, new rules, regulations and laws.) Get involved, said Cameron Pappas of Norton's Florist.

Cameron joined his family business in 2015, but he grew up in Birmingham, Alabama (and always knew he wanted to be involved with Norton's). He said his involvement with area group, including two young professionals' groups, has helped him stay updated and engaged on the city's revitalization efforts.

"Both of these organizations are important to me so that I can stay connected with other business owners, as well as other young professionals that can lend me ideas and feedback about the future of the city," he said.

Another "secret" to their ability to stay tapped into coming updates? Both men like a good chat: Don't underestimate how informal networking can help you chart the future of your business, said Cameron.

"Dad and I are very social individuals," he said, with a laugh. "I think that this is a great strength to someone who runs a business. Either one of us could talk to a brick wall if you put us in a room with no one else to talk to."



**BIRMINGHAM PROUD** In the past few years, Norton's has started stocking more locally made goods, including products made from an urban beekeeper who maintains hives on a local rooftop, and candles. The candles have helped draw in young, hip customers such as Katie Hicks.

## NO HEIR APPARENT?

If you're reading this story as a parent in the floral industry and feeling frustrated that your own children aren't exactly flocking back to the business ... get yourself to SAF Palm Beach 2017.



That's when Diane Thieoldft, an expert in managing multiple generations in the workforce, will tell Society of American Florists annual convention attendees about how family business matriarchs and patriarchs can groom their own kids for leadership positions — and the mistakes and miscommunications that happen too frequently and can send the next generation running far, far away. In addition to providing research on best practices and practical tips, Thieoldft will moderate a discussion among millennial industry members, including Cameron Pappas, who so enthusiastically joined his father, Gus, in the family's business two years ago.

Find out more and register yourself (and your next gen leaders) for SAF Palm Beach 2017 at [safnow.org/moreonline](http://safnow.org/moreonline).

—M.W.

## GETTING OUT THE MESSAGE

In addition to the new look for the showroom, Gus and Cameron are dreaming up new ways to reach downtown customers and businesses.

For several years leading up to Cameron's return to the business, Gus had been toying with a marketing concept, "Flowers in the City," which would combine new designs and messaging to attract clients. The goal: Communicate to customers that Norton's is a local florist, with two downtown locations, and the place, therefore, to buy flowers. It's a message Cameron expects his fellow millennials to appreciate.

"Millennials eat at small businesses, we shop at small businesses, we love everything local," he said. "What can be more local than a unique flower shop?"

A big part of Cameron's role at Norton's has been to help Gus put big-picture concepts such as Flowers in the City into practice. Together, the two have

jumped into the effort with gusto, commissioning a local third party to create a logo for the effort (the city skyline and flowers) and creating the “Birmingham Collection,” a series of eight new floral designs, priced \$75 to \$125, that are named for and inspired by city areas and landmarks, including neighborhoods, famous buildings, statues and former businesses.

Cameron and Gus are currently working with area businesses, including restaurants and boutiques, that will feature the designs in their spaces for a scheduled weeklong period when Flowers in the City officially launches this fall. (Customers will receive a discount at Norton’s if they mention seeing the designs around the city.) The exact date hasn’t been announced yet —more on that in a minute — but Cameron already is teasing the name, Flowers in the City, on social media.

Through Flowers in the City, Gus and Cameron can focus more energy on the downtown area, as opposed to the overall metro region. (Their total delivery area stretches 25 miles in every direction around the main business and includes suburban and rural areas.) The campaign is in keeping with other efforts the pair have undertaken in recent years to rethink overall delivery based on customer demand. For instance, in the last few years they’ve added a new dedicated downtown route due to the rapid growth of the city center.

“Per the Birmingham Business Journal, there will be demand for 500 new residential units per year through 2030,” Cameron said. “We expect a continuous increase in downtown business.”

Cameron and Gus are also working on other initiatives that speak to changes in consumer buying habits. For instance, this fall, they’ll launch NortonsNow, an expedited delivery service inspired by Amazon. For a collection of eight arrangements (six vases and two wrapped bouquets), the shop is guaranteeing delivery within 90 minutes to anywhere in Birmingham’s city center. The farthest delivery point for the service is about eight miles from Norton’s. Within that delivery area, there’s an estimated daytime population of about 170,000 people, according to Cameron.

“Not even Amazon is offering that kind of delivery time in Birmingham, at least not yet,” Cameron said.

At press time, Gus and Cameron were finalizing plans to coordinate the launch of Flowers in the City with the unveiling of the new showroom. (NortonsNow will begin sometime shortly after.) Because they see both efforts as a way to introduce — or re-introduce — themselves to downtown Birmingham, they’ll tie the plans in with the Society of American Florists’ annual Petal It Forward event on October 11, a feel-good campaign that last year helped Norton’s emphasize its hometown roots to local customers. (Read more about Petal It Forward on p. 26.)

As Cameron takes on a bigger role in the business, these new efforts feel like the beginning of much more still to

come, he said. Recalling a story he once heard about another entrepreneur in the South, Truett S. Cathy, founder of Chick-fil-a, Cameron said the goal for him is constant improvements and incremental adjustments — and, ultimately, a vision of great things for the business his father brought into the family.

“Change isn’t easy; it takes patience and time,” he admitted. “However, if we aren’t improving in every aspect, then we aren’t getting better. If we aren’t getting better, then we can’t get bigger.” 🌿

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**THERE IN A FLASH** To accommodate significant growth in Birmingham’s city center, the team at Norton’s, including driver Richie Gilbreath, has retooled routes and is adding new services, including an expedited delivery service for a select series of designs in just 90 minutes.