



LOVE YOUR LOCAL

A storied flower shop in Washington, D.C., builds on its history to stay relevant with customers today.

BY KATIE HENDRICK VINCENT

PHOTOS BY RYAN SMITH

LEE'S FLOWER AND CARD SHOP

Washington, D.C.

Year Founded: 1945

Total No. of Employees: 15

Generation: Fourth

Annual Sales: \$1 million-plus

Last Mother's Day weekend, amidst the bustle of the holiday, Stacie Lee Banks, AAF, a third-generation co-owner of Lee's Flower and Card Shop in Washington, D.C., rose extra early for an impromptu 4 a.m. visit to her wholesaler.

When Kidd O'Shea, the entertainment reporter for "Good Morning Washington," requested the previous day to come film in the shop, Banks knew it would make great television to do an on-air design tutorial with the newsman, famous for his lighthearted, self-effacing humor — so she raced to purchase extra product.

TOGETHER TIME Family members Rick Lee, Kristie Lee Tyler, Samarah Banks and Stacie Lee Banks, AAF, are helping to shepherd their business into the next generation, while honoring its history.

Several hours with O'Shea resulted in multiple segments throughout the morning news program. In addition to flaunting his amateur arranging skills, O'Shea chatted with Banks about the shop's deep roots in the nation's capital, her recent award from the D.C. Chamber of Commerce, which named her its Small Business Person of the Year for 2018, and the value of working with a professional florist. He later accompanied fourth-generation employees, Samarah Banks (Stacie's daughter) and Joi Tyler (her niece), on a surprise delivery to their grandmother.

That high-profile plug did not happen randomly. The reporter selected the 74-year-old shop for its can-do attitude, community connections, rich history and decidedly local vibe.

These qualities feel exceedingly rare in a world dominated by Amazon. Just last month, the e-commerce behemoth was named the world's most valuable public company, worth roughly \$800 billion. According to a recent Bloomberg study, more than half of all product searches start on Amazon.com.

How can you compete with "the Everything Store" that has transformed the retail landscape? That is the question facing businesses of all sizes and in all industries.

"Adding millions of SKUs and amassing thousands of reviews is not the way," said Angelica Valentine, marketing manager for San Francisco-based data firm LISNR, in an article for The Future of Customer Engagement and Commerce, a retail news site. Instead, she advises brick-and-mortar retailers to focus on their exclusive strengths — nurturing personal relationships — and "creating a unique experience for customers to keep them coming back."

That is precisely the mantra of Lee's.

"We specialize in flowers, but our business, really, is rooted in people," said Banks, who took over the shop, founded by her grandparents, with her sister, Kristie Lee Tyler, in 2012.

Even in a city with a notoriously transient population that cycles in and



NEIGHBORHOOD STAPLE Lee's has become a beloved business in Washington's U Street neighborhood, having survived and thrived through seven decades of change.

out with each election, the company has established name recognition by being a community advocate, constantly seeking, embracing — and creating — opportunities that uplift their neighbors and bring people together. It's a mindset that founders William and Winifred Lee supported and proudly passed down to their children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

"I just don't see how you can survive as a small business if you don't care

about relationships," said Banks, who saw Lee's sales grow by 18 percent last year. "We're always doing things to meet new people, because you need a really big web of potential customers. But what's sustained us long-term, especially through the lean times, are families that have been with us for generations. We knew their parents and grandparents and they knew ours. It's really special."



SERVICE FIRST “I’ve always considered it my civic duty to help my neighborhood and my city,” said Rick Lee.

A Firm Foundation

Lee’s sits at 1026 U Street, a corridor once known as “Black Broadway.” During segregation, U Street was the hub of commercial, intellectual and cultural life for African Americans in Washington, D.C. Concert halls and nightclubs hosted legendary performers such as Duke Ellington, Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway and Sarah Vaughan. Distinguished lawyer and professor Charles Hamilton Houston mentored future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall at nearby Howard University.

“In the flower shop’s early years, there was tremendous cohesion in the area,” said Rick Lee, William and Winifred’s son and Stacie and Kristie’s father, who led the shop from 1990 to 2012. “Everybody knew everybody. We had this great world, full of activity, all to ourselves.”

While a teenager, Lee helped in the shop after school. He joined the family business as a full-time employee in 1968, a year that turned out to be a watershed moment in the history of the country — and the business. Hours after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on April 4, 1968, chaos erupted in the city, and Lee stayed at the shop all night to protect the business. Fortunately, the night passed without incident. “U Street was

spared most of the fires and looting,” Lee said. Still, the unrest, responsible for 13 deaths and millions of dollars in property damage, scared a lot of business owners, who closed up shop.

And Lee’s soon faced other challenges. On the heels of the riots came construction for Metro, the city’s subway system, a project that had enormous economic benefits in the long run, Lee said, but that exacerbated problems at the time.

For a while, “U Street was pretty much decimated,” he said. “It looked like a war zone with the street completely torn up. Hardly any businesses remained. Drug trafficking became a major issue. Things looked pretty bleak.”

Unwilling to give up on their community or the business they’d built, the Lee family persevered.

“We kept our eyes open for drug deals and reported them to the police,” he said.

Eventually, that vigilance— and the family’s commitment to the community — paid off. A dramatic revitalization of U Street, which started in the late 1990s, means that, today, trendy shops, expensive restaurants and high-end real estate abound — with Lee’s still at the center of the neighborhood.

A Passion for People

As Rick, and then later Stacie and Kristie, stepped in as owners, their path forward was clear, even if their success wasn’t guaranteed. They wanted to build on the strong foundation William and Winifred had created, while ensuring that Lee’s continued to appeal to modern customers, who in many cases are looking for experiences, not just products, when they choose a brick and mortar over Amazon. Over the years, three goals have helped them stay on that path.

THE GOAL:

Be true community partners

THE EFFORT:

Embrace volunteerism

Amazon may have warehouses full of goods but here’s something they don’t have: the ability to turn up at local community breakfasts or events with a big smile (and a can-do attitude). Lee’s has that second part in spades.

“You have to decide to make service a priority, which is easier said than done when you have a business to run,” Rick Lee said. “But I’ve always considered it my civic duty to help my neighborhood and my city. And it helped that I had always had good employees I could count on in my absence.”

Over the years, Lee held many prominent positions in the community, including small business chair of United Way and district chairman of the Boy Scouts of America. He helped found the D.C. chapter of the Junior Chamber International (also known as the Jaycees), volunteered with the Children’s Trust Fund (an organization aimed at preventing child abuse), served on a local gas company’s consumer advisory board and participated in the New Columbia Statehood Commission (an independent agency in the D.C. city government that lobbies to give residents voting rights in the Electoral College and for representatives in Congress).

Following in her father’s footsteps, Banks serves on the board of N Street Village (a nonprofit that empowers homeless and low-income Washington women) and the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. She spent 18 years on the board of Martha’s Table (a nonprofit that

supports strong families by increasing access to high-quality education, food and community resources). Recently, the mayor appointed her to be vice chair of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

For her part, Tyler has focused on promoting D.C. artists (more on this later) and made it her New Year's resolution to formally join "at least one" service organization in 2019.

These lists of community activities — which are far from comprehensive — represent "a lot of time away from the shop," but the payoff surpasses the commitment, Banks insists.

"First and foremost, we serve because we love helping people," she said. "But all the business that comes out of it is a nice perk!" Locals take notice of Lee's employees' interest in the community and reward it. "All my fellow board members use our shop for their personal and professional flower needs, and generously give us referrals," Banks said.

THE GOAL: Generate good feelings

THE EFFORT: Be charitable

Like many florists, Lee's receives a lot of requests for charitable do-

nations — and saying "no" doesn't come easily. Fortunately, Banks and Tyler have come up with a solution that lets them contribute often without giving away too much money.

"Whenever an organization asks for a silent auction item, we offer a private design class for six people, with wine and hors d'oeuvres, valued at \$600," Banks said.

Why this tactic works: It gets feet in the door, helps the shop connect with people they might not already know and provides a training opportunity for young designers to teach.

"Ideally, we get six new customers who have a great time, sign up for more classes in the future and tell their friends about us," Banks said.

Last fall, the shop also participated in the Society of American Florists' Petal It Forward initiative for the first time, giving away 100 bouquets to passersby on U Street.

"Everyone loved it," Banks said. "Who doesn't enjoy free flowers? Plus, the 'pay it forward' concept really resonated with people."

(For more advice on charitable giving and how to account for it, read "The Cost of Doing Good," p. 34.)

LET'S GET POLITICAL

The staff of Lee's Flower and Card Shop has never shied away from supporting causes important to them, nor taking a political stance — particularly during local elections.

"It's hard to believe, because D.C. is constantly in the news with the federal government, but this is actually a small city," co-owner Stacie Lee Banks said. "For as long as I can remember, we've always known the mayor and most of the local politicians. Political activism has been another big catalyst for business."

The relationship usually starts before the officials take office. "We've campaigned for a lot of people," Banks said. "It helps to befriend them before they become VIPs. Of course, we don't always pick the winner!"

Lee's employees went door-to-door advocating for the current mayor, Muriel Bowser, in 2014. "She has been very loyal to us ever since," Banks said. Each November, for instance, Bowser participates in Lee's Small Business Saturday festivities.

Rick Lee, the shop's second-generation former owner, got "the political bug" himself back in 1982 when he ran for city council. For seven years prior to that, the company had operated a second location in southeastern D.C., but Lee decided to close it to concentrate on his campaign.

"I didn't win, but I have no regrets," he said. "I met a ton of people in the process. It turned out to be great exposure for the business."

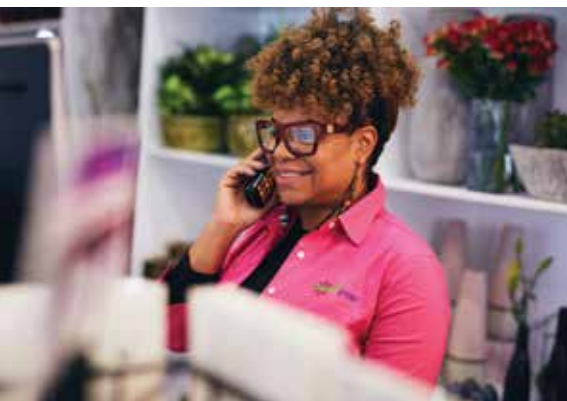
Additionally, the shop provides flowers for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's gala each September, a high-profile event that typically calls for 300 to 600 centerpieces. The shop often picks up business for members' individual needs, as well.

Active participants in the Society of American Florists' Congressional Action Days for the past 15 or 20 years, Lee's staff has also contributed designs for events such as the kickoff breakfast and SAFPAC fundraising dinner. (Find out more about this year's event, held March 11-12, at safnow.org.)

-K.H.V.



GOODS TO GO Lee's Cross Pollination, a small gift area inside the flower shop, launched in late November 2018. The shop partners with local creatives and small business owners who can sell their goods on consignment for a 50/50 split.



PARTY PEOPLE During Lee's "Flower Power Happy Hour," visitors receive a 50 percent discount on flowers and 20 percent discount on plants. The shop is known for its in-store events and experiences, along with its friendly, welcoming staff.

THE GOAL: Get people in the store

THE EFFORT: Create experiences

In recent years, Lee's has pursued more interactive activities, such as the aforementioned design classes.

"Offering 'experiences' makes us more of a destination shop," Banks said. "And once again, they help us get to know people."

Among the shop's major annual events: the "Dog Days of Summer Sidewalk Sale" (sponsored by the Greater Mid-City Business Association) and Small Business Saturday. But the shop maintains a bustling seasonal and weekly calendar too.

Five years ago, the shop started hosting mini concerts on summer evenings.

"We were trying to come up with a way to boost business during our slowest time of the year," Banks said.

Every Friday throughout July, August and part of September, emerging musicians (who work for a small stipend) perform outside the shop. Lee's advertises the free shows through Constant Contact and social media.

"It worked wonderfully," Banks said. "Artists loved the exposure, and we had a good hook to get feet in our shop."

About 20 to 30 people browse the shop because of the concerts ("a huge number for a summer evening," Banks said) and countless others notice the activity while walking along U Street en route to bars and restaurants.

To pump up the pomp of the concert series, Banks and Tyler added a sale, the "Flower Power Happy Hour," in conjunction with it. (From 3 to 7 p.m., visitors receive a 50 percent discount on flowers and 20 percent discount on plants.)

"It's really blossomed," Banks said of the now year-round promotion. "We have regulars. And it got voted 'Best non-alcoholic happy hour' in Washington City Paper. I think they made up that category — but, hey, it's flattering and free advertising!"

Given the success of welcoming musicians into the shop, Banks and Tyler next added a monthly pop up shop, where local artisans could set up stands (for free) to sell products like handmade soaps, jewelry and D.C.-themed giftware. They started by inviting makers Tyler had befriended

while perusing area bazaars. "Then word of mouth quickly spread through the art community," Tyler said. "People started contacting us asking if they could sell at Lee's."

"The pop ups turned out to be another win-win," Banks said. "In helping these entrepreneurs, we grow our fanbase. A lot of their customers purchase some grab-and-go flowers while they're here."

Out of the pop ups grew the business's latest endeavor: Lee's Cross Pollination, a small gift area inside the flower shop, launched in late November 2018. The shop partners with local creatives and small business owners who can sell their goods on consignment for a 50/50 split with Lee's, which advertises the goods on Instagram (@leescrosspollination).

"It's still in its infancy," Tyler said. "But so far, it seems promising. There are still a lot of people who like to actually pick up and touch products before purchasing them. And we see quite a few customers looking for something small and cute for their apartment or who want to grab a hostess gift on their way to a dinner party."

Fueling the Future

Another endearing trait for Lee's long-time customers: encountering a sea of familiar faces they've watched grow up.

"My entire family has come through at some point," Banks said. "The shop was training ground for what it's like to have a job."

For Banks, there was "never a question" of turning that first job into a career.

"I love this business. It's an honor to provide a living for so many people and to do it through a service that makes people happy," she said. "And it's a huge honor to preserve my grandparents' legacy."

Tyler, on the other hand, had a more roundabout journey that involved 15 years working for Verizon before leaving corporate America for the more positive, encouraging environment of her family's business.

Working her way up as a regular staff member, she started by tackling Lee's office work, then she added marketing duties, and one day, to her surprise, she felt inspired to try design, which she learned by shadowing more experienced employees.

"I never knew I had it in me," she said, with a laugh. As an adult, she feels "way more engaged" in the business than she did as a "very sporadic teenage helper," she said.

Rick Lee is thrilled with the direction the latest generations are taking the business.

"My girls have my parents' vision and spirit," he said. "My folks were very forward-thinking people who always tried to stay ahead of the curve. They weren't afraid of change or trying something new — they started with a flower shop, then the next thing you know, they bought a restaurant, then a card shop..."

LOOKING GOOD!

Lee's underwent a major renovation starting in 2016. The family worked with an interior designer to make the 2,000-square-foot shop feel more modern and welcoming. Read about that transformation on p. 12. Plus see photos from throughout the family's history at safnow.org/moreonline.

"WE'RE ALWAYS DOING THINGS TO MEET NEW PEOPLE, BECAUSE YOU NEED A REALLY BIG WEB OF POTENTIAL CUSTOMERS."

—STACIE LEE BANKS, AAF

Banks and Tyler noticed how, over the years, more homes went up on the blocks surrounding U Street ("because of Metro, of course," Lee said, with a laugh), which led to more restaurants.

"They suggested we expand our hours to work the weekends to pick up the brunch crowd," Lee said. "Wouldn't you know? Our foot traffic has gone way up in the past decade."

The women want their twenty-something daughters, Samarah and Joi, and Tyler's 15-year-old son, Chase, to feel that same freedom to contribute their own ideas and opinions.

"We emphasize that there's no favoritism for family members and they need to be on time and follow the same rules as everyone else," Tyler said. "But at the same time, we remind them that it will one day be their business and that it's in their best interest to get invested — to learn the many aspects of running a flower

shop and share the special knowledge and skills they have that will help Lee's grow."

Samarah Banks, for instance, recently attended Michael Gaffney's American School of Flower Design in Los Angeles and came home with a lot of modern techniques she's incorporated into shop specials and shared in Facebook Live videos. (Read more about Samarah's journey on p. 16.) Joi, a part-time model, has used her Instagram expertise to help elevate the shop's social media presence. She also helps a lot managing Lee's inventory and pricing.

"All of them — they're determined to stay on top of trends, evolve, do whatever it takes to remain relevant with customers," Lee said. "My parents would be so proud." 🌸

Katie Hendrick Vincent is the senior contributing editor of Floral Management. kvincent@safnow.org



ARTISTIC RENDERING After the family finished their most recent renovation, they commissioned a mural through Murals DC to honor founders William and Winifred Lee. To protect the art from graffiti or defacement, they work with the city and the community through a coordinated effort known as graffiti abatement.