Married to the Job

Couples who run a yard together have found love and lumber can coexist.

By Kate Tyndall

Mixing wedlock and business might seem a recipe for disaster, but LBM dealers across the country are proof that having a Mr. and Mrs. run the yard can work out just fine.

That’s not to say it’s an eternal honeymoon. There are accommodations to be made and differences in temperament to be sorted out, sometimes right in the office. “When we first started,” Marilyn Archer recalls, “Robert pulled me aside and said, ‘You have got to stop chewing me out in front of people.’

“And I did, didn’t I?” she says, appealing to her husband.

“You did,” he affirms.

Robert and Marilyn Archer have been married to each other for 31 years and to Morton Lumber in Borger, Texas, for 29. The yard is a third party in their relationship that demands a disproportionate share of attention.

“It’s always there,” says Marilyn.

“24/7,” adds her spouse.

Still, the Archers insist—as do a number of couples that ProSales...
Sometimes you just want to go home and watch The Biggest Loser, Jane Fever says. Other nights, says husband Dan, “we’ll spend three hours talking about the business.”

While Jeff Wenning may have flirted with a dynamic dream holding his first-born son in his arms, the Bagwells of Bagwell Lumber in Avon Park, Fla., are living it.

The lumberyard was opened by Gary Bagwell’s dad Tommy in 1957. Gary and his wife Betsy have been running the yard for 33 years together, through the birth of children, devastating hurricanes and a fire that destroyed the yard in 1998. Both of the Bagwell’s children—Dusty, 31, and Brandee, 29—work at the yard with their parents. “My babies were weighed in navel buds when they were little,” Betsy says with a laugh.

“The deal is that Gary is the boss,” she says.

“Here,” Gary clarifies, meaning the office. “At home, she is the boss.”

Betsy started out doing mostly bookkeeping, but got into sales when the yard lost a salesman. The day the yard burned down, Betsy ferried all the technical equipment to the warehouse, including phones and copy machines, then sat down and started calling customers to tell them Bagwell was still in business.

It took Jeff four years before he worked up enough nerve to ask her on a date. “Jeff’s brother always teases him that he had to use all his charm on me,” she says. When Jeff runs the yard, Nancy keeps track of receivables paperwork done. It’s a small lumberyard, so we don’t have a lot of rigid titles.”

As far as Jeff is concerned, the togetherness is one of the benefits of being married and working in the same business. “I get to see her every day and she has lots of good ideas,” he says.

“I always married my best friend,” says Nancy, who grew up in a farming family and whose parents worked side by side. “I think it’s handy we work together because, if he’s in a bad mood, you know it’s not you, it’s what happened that day at work, and you know what it is.”

Along the way there have been three kids, the two older girls now off at college, with only Tyler, a seventh grader, left at home. Middle child Renee was pressed into service sweeping the show-room and finish shop beginning when she was 15. Says Nancy: “She was so glad to graduate and go away to college.”

Combining kids and work was not really an issue for the Wenning’s. “After my kids were born, I would take one day off a week,” says Nancy. “She knows setting up the yard’s new computer system when eldest daughter Kelsey was 6 months old, cradling the baby in a wheelbarrow while she worked.

When son Tyler was only a few hours old, Nancy watched her husband holding the infant with a big smile on his face. “She has done a fantastic job,” Dan says. “I would say her goal is to retire running a lumberyard.”

Dan agrees with the notion that there’s bound to be friction when working with your spouse, “but you work through and manage that. When we disagree, it’s on the mechanics. For example, if you have to fire someone, what do you tell them then? Do you tell someone it’s not working out, or do you start with, ‘I get the feeling you don’t want to work here.’ We don’t disagree on the big things. We don’t argue on the core elements of the business. It’s more nuanced, do you step one to two feet first.”

Whether the business is the size of a Lamperts, with its 32 stores, or five states, or one-yard, work comes home.

“We’re very much a joint effort in the division of responsibilities,” Alan says. “I have learned I can’t do all of it at the store. And as my wife has taken over responsibilities, it has been helpful. We do discuss things on both sides and share ideas and concerns. We have found a pretty clean and amicable division of responsibilities. It works 95% of the time. When it doesn’t, we sit back and say, ‘Does it really matter whether we get all upset about this?’”

“I joke and say we have been married 28 years and been happily married for 11,” Alan adds.

Like the Archers, the Medinas find it impossible not to bring work home. “Sometimes the business is a part of your life. There is no avoiding it, unless your business is wildly successful. And if it is, it’s because you were taking it home.”

“I like working with my spouse. She’s hot, and she brings an energy to the store that, after 25 years, I’ve lost,” Dan says.

Dan and Jane Fever Lamperts, St. Cloud, Minn.

Jane Fever’s proposal to Dan Fever is turning out to be as successful as the one he made to her. Just under two years ago, Jane told Dan she wanted to take on Lamperts’ worst-performing yard. The request by Dan’s wife of seven years took him aback. While Dan has been working at Lamperts, a family concern, since he was 15, his wife had spent most of her career in Silicon Valley in the high-tech industry and doing turnaround work. Lumber was not on her resume.

When she told him what she wanted to do, Dan says, “I did what most guys would do hearing that: I laughed. ‘I told her that lumberyards don’t pay the compensation you are entitled to and used to,’ he says. ‘Lumberyards are not very glamorous. She looked at me and said, ‘It’s not about the money. I’d like to help you—and I’d like to win.’”

Under Jane’s leadership, that yard posted a 60% increase in sales in 2010. Now she manages all four of Lamperts’ yards serv- ing the Twin Cities.

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“We pick it up the next day. It’s very important to keep it separate. Gary’s dad brought work home, and he didn’t want that for his relationship. His dad told him he thought about it 24 hours a day.

“In the beginning, we even had lunch separately. Now I guess we’re old enough to lunch together.”

Randall and Patricia Jones
Jones Lumber, Henderson, Tenn.

Patricia Jones of Jones Lumber remembers her husband Randall fired her the second week they worked together.

“I got to the door and he said, ‘Where are you going?’” she says. “I said, ‘You told me if that was the best I could do, I might as well go home, so I’m going.’ He backtracked.”

At the time, the couple had three young boys and a yearning to spend more time together as family than Randall’s job as a pipefitter allowed. So after 16 years of laying pipe and constant travel, he and his wife decided to buy a business. Like the Archers, they looked at several, including a dry-cleaning establishment, and just happened to end up buying a lumberyard.

While that togetherness idea might seem to have imploded right off the bat, it’s been working well for the past 21 years.

“We had to learn each other’s territory,” says Patricia, who has been running the yard with her husband of 32 years since 1989.

For the Jones, designating a clear boss and maintaining a strict division of labor has been key. “We divided it up as to who would do what,” she says. I oversaw the books at one time, and I oversaw the outside sales for millwork. Randall hired everybody but the bookkeepers and me. I let Randall be the boss.

“When I first came into the business, it was very much a man’s world,” Patricia says. “A contractor would come in wanting a window or a door, but they would ask to speak to Randall, and I wouldn’t say anything, even though that was my area. Randall would then tell them to talk to me. Later, I got brassier.”

Adjusting to each other’s temperament was something Patricia says the couple had to work at, since “I’m a socialite and I want to make sure everybody is happy and has a cup of coffee, while Randall is a negotiator and a by-the-rules guy.”

“There’s not a lot of bad to it,” she says, “as long as you can adjust to each other.”

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