

Luke Dow with his mother, Patricia, at their Lake George Steamboat Co., a generational family business.

PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA



All in the family

Despite challenges, multigenerational businesses throughout the Adirondacks survive and even thrive

BY HOLLY RIDDLE

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), only a one-third of the country's family-owned businesses survive to the second generation, only 12% make it into the third generation and only 3% remain past that. Regionally, Lauren Richard, small business program director at the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA), sees the struggles these family businesses encounter firsthand.

"In a lot of cases, the kids want to do something different. There's also the situation where most business owners don't have a succession plan. They haven't actually had those conversations with the people they have in mind ... to take over their business. They're making assumptions," Richard said. "One day they're like, 'OK. It's time to retire. It's your turn,' and the kids say, 'What do you mean? This is not what I had in mind.'"

Add on the broader challenges that Adirondack small businesses face, such as seasonality

and labor force issues, and several things are clear. When an Adirondack small business not only survives throughout the decades, but thrives, becoming an integral part of its community, it is a big deal. And when that small business remains within the family, passing from generation to generation, it is an even greater accomplishment.

An unusual inheritance

For some multigenerational businesses throughout the area, there has been no question the chil-



Above: **At Nelson's Cottages on Fourth Lake in Inlet, Julie Meeks Nelson carries on the family business of seasonal cabin rentals. She grew up on the property, left for a teaching career and returned to take over the business from her mother and stepfather. Right: Charlie Johns Store, a general store in Speculator. The store has been in the Lane family since the 1970s, now consisting of Jonathan Lane, his wife, Lynn, and their daughters Morgan and Bentley.** PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

dren and then grandchildren would take over the business one day.

This was the case for Luke Dow, who now oversees the Lake George Steamboat Co., an iconic fixture within the Adirondacks, originally established in 1817. The Dow family took ownership in the 1940s.

"Ever since I was born, my whole world has been boats," he said. "I've always known that I would take over the business."

Luke Dow's father, Bill Dow, ran the business right up until his passing at the age of 86, in 2022.

"Retirement was not in his vocabulary," Dow said. "He was a dreamer. ... He always wanted to build another boat. ... He always wanted to make things better." (For example, it was Bill Dow's idea to add the steam-powered Minne-Ha-Ha to the business's fleet, even though he was told it would be a failure; now, it is the business's flagship boat.)

Today, Dow noted, it is up to him and the

remaining family members to continue his father's dreams, and he has thrown all of his energy into the effort.

"This company is very important to us—to my family, to the people of the lake—and I would be foolish to abandon that for any reason outside of survival," he said.

For other families, they may initially fall more in line with the trends found nationally via the SBA or regionally at ANCA. The next generation may have other plans for their lives, even full-fledged careers. However, when faced with the reality that their parents may sell the





Above: **Boats By George** is a generational family-owned business with family members founder **George Pensel**, his wife, **Patty**, and their sons **Adam** and **Andrew**. Seen here at their marina in Cleverdale on the east side of Lake George, they also have a large boat showroom in Lake George village and additional boat servicing enterprises in the southern Adirondacks. At left: **The Natural Stone Bridge and Caves** in Pottersville has been a family business for nine generations. Three generations shown here are: **Greg Beckler**, his wife, **Dee Beckler**, Greg's parents **Ed** and **Janet "Jenny" Beckler** and Greg's daughter **Jenn Beckler**. PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

family business, children return home.

Julie Meeks Nelson spent many years and summers as a teen and young adult working with her mother and stepfather at Nelson's Cottages in Inlet, before developing a teaching career in Rochester.

"My mom became disabled, and they were going to sell the place. I didn't want them to. I told them I would quit teaching and come home and run the place if they would let me, and they did," Meeks Nelson said. "I had grown up here. All my best memories from childhood were living here at Nelson's and in Inlet. I couldn't stomach the idea of this not being my home anymore. ... It was hard. I really loved teaching, but, looking back, I feel like I definitely made the right decision."

The decision was similar for sisters Kelsey and Alyssa Carroll—but they leapt at shifting their career focus to Portside Restaurant in Westport only after hearing a rumor that

their father James “Jim” Carroll had sold the family business.

Alyssa Carroll said, “I called up my dad and I was like, ‘Excuse me. Why didn’t you tell us that you sold the business? We should be part of this discussion.’ My dad, in his very dry way, went, ‘Oh, what did I get for it?’ It was just a rumor.”

“It made me realize that if my reaction was that I was really mad that the business sold, then obviously I had a passion for it that I wasn’t recognizing prior,” she said. “I sent Kelsey and her husband, Beck, an extremely long email that laid out what just happened. ‘I think I want to dive in and try to do the restaurant. I know that that’s something that you and Beck are considering doing. Could I do it with you?’ They wrote back, ‘Yes, that was the missing piece. We had just needed an extra push.’”

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—Lisa Weibrecht,
owner of the Mirror Lake Inn

Other families also have unique stories of passing down the family business. At Adirondack Fragrance Farm, founder Sandy Maine enlisted her daughter-in-law, Yen Maine, to take the reins. Prior, Yen had been working at Citibank in China, where she met and lived with her husband, Sandy’s son, Clark. After the COVID-19 pandemic, Yen and Clark relocated to the Adirondacks, and now Yen and Sandy are pushing the business to new heights, combining their very different but very complementary areas of expertise.

Regardless of how the current generations of family business owners and operators came into their roles, many are not only continuing to maintain businesses that boast great person-

al value, but also businesses that provide significant, even vital, value to their communities.

Embedded in the fabric of Adirondack life

Throughout the Adirondacks, it is not uncommon to find small towns and villages where the residents are either reliant on their local small business owners or required to travel

excessive distances for goods and services that many may take for granted. This can create a unique bond between the community and its small businesses.

In Speculator, Charlie Johns Store is the primary place to go for groceries, hardware, lawn and garden supplies and more, and the store is only closed a few days a year.

“We have solid hours, rain or shine. We don’t



Adirondack Fragrance Farm entrepreneurs Sandy Maine and her daughter-in-law Yen Maine gather balsam for products on their property outside of Parishville. The business started by Sandy Maine is now being run by Yen Maine. PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA



Multiple generations at Mirror Lake Inn in Lake Placid: In the above photo from the 1990s, Lisa and Ed Weibrecht with their young sons Andrew, Jonathan and Ethan pose with an award presented to them by AAA (the two men on right). At left: The present-day Weibrecht family from left to right: Lisa Weibrecht, her husband, Ed, their son Andrew, his wife, Denja, and their daughter Adalina. PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

close when there's bad weather. People lean on us for that," said Lynn Lane, who co-owns the store with husband Jonathan Lane, who took over the business from his father, Dean. The couple's two teen daughters, Morgan and Bentley, work in the store as well. "They know we're going to be here except for Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas ... and that never, ever varies."

In Long Lake, Hoss's Country Corner is similarly a true general store, selling everything from groceries to clothing to camping gear to souvenirs, but it also caters to a large tourism market at the same time.

"Our local market is here to support us," said Nathan Hosley, who operates the business his parents purchased in 1972, alongside his siblings and children, "but the big market here is the tourism economy of the Adirondacks."

That tourism economy, he noted, is just as good a reason for ensuring local, small and multigenerational businesses remain in small places like Long Lake.

"It's important for the town," he said. "You look at some of the smaller towns around us where the businesses like Hoss's that are gen-

erational don't make it, and the towns start to fade away. By having an ice cream stand and a store, and other stores in town, it's a place people want to come to vacation."

At Lake Placid's Mirror Lake Inn, the Weibrecht family, who purchased the property in the 1970s, knows the appeal of a family versus corporate business.

"We're part of the community," matriarch Lisa Weibrecht said. "Our kids go to school here. They go to the arts center. They use the facilities in town. That's the difference between a family-run operation and a corporate hotel."

Her son Andrew, a U.S. Skiing Hall of Famer and two-time Olympic medalist before returning to the family business as operations manager, likewise said, "There's something special about a family business, especially an active family business where the family is really there. It just brings a different character. ... You can feel the sweat and blood that the family's put in over the years."

Of course, to serve all those travelers who are stopping into places like Hoss's and the

Mirror Lake Inn for the family-run feel, these businesses need employees—and that is something that benefits the local communities, too.

In Pottersville, for example, Natural Stone Bridge and Caves has been in the same family for more than two centuries, with nine generations involved in the business thus far. The attraction has evolved significantly over the years, but the local employment base—particularly high schoolers—has come to rely on the site for seasonal work. Some of those employees stick around long-term, and others use the experience they have gained at Natural Stone Bridge and Caves to go on and pursue related careers.

At Lake George Steamboat Co., Luke Dow likewise said the business has historically extensively hired local young adults.

All the while, many of these multigenerational family businesses offer their communities a gathering place or third space, further cementing their places within the fabric of Adirondack life.

At Charlie Johns Store, Lynn Lane said, "As cashiers, you see the same people at the same times every single day at the store. Maybe it's three times a day, but they're there at the same time ... Their excursion for the day might be going to Charlie Johns. That's what they do to get out of the house. ... I think that's why [the store] does so well in this community. People need it as a place to go, genuinely."

Jonathan Lane said, “The post office is in the adjacent building, so people come in the morning, go to their post office box, get their mail. The bank is also right there, so they go to the bank if they need to, and then they stop into the store, have a cup of coffee and talk to people. It’s a social element that the community has here, [since we’re] open all the time.”

Similarly, at Portside Restaurant and the Westport Marina, Alyssa Carroll said, “The [restaurant] and the marina in general have always been a really amazing third space in Westport. It’s a place to gather. ... I think it’s a constant that we’ve had for the last 40-plus years, as the place where you can see your friends. I think

that’s deeply important in this community.”

“That was a conscious effort,” Jim Carroll said. “I had a parent thank me when [Alyssa] was in kindergarten because we allowed people under 21 to come in on nights with music ... and dance. He knew that his daughter and son had a safe space that they could go to and that he didn’t have to worry about them. That stuck with me from that moment, and so we targeted that as much as possible, to make it an open space and be welcoming.”

Meanwhile, fueling all these businesses is a love for not just their work, but for their communities and families as well—and that means that many of them are not going any-

where anytime soon.

As George Pensel, who runs Boats by George in Lake George with his wife and two sons, said, “One thing in our family history and that [my children] grew up with, is that this almost isn’t work. It’s almost like breathing. This is how we breathe. This is how we survive. ... No one retires in this business. This is a full-time and beyond business, but there’s a lot of reward in it.” ■



HOLLY RIDDLE is a lifestyle and business journalist based in Plattsburgh. Her work is featured in regional and national publications, covering small businesses, food, agriculture and travel.



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