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FAMILY BUSINESS:::A mother-daughter collaboration

By Pamela Cotant
November 27, 2006

Peg Scholtes, who worked for a non-profit family advocacy organization for 23 years, had a large framed photo of the baby department in the old Kresge's store hanging in her office.

The black-and-white photo, which was taken in 1939 when the store stood on Madison's Capitol Square, represented a dream for Scholtes, who also had kids' toys and art related to kids in her office at Family Enhancement.

"I always wanted to have a children's store," Scholtes said.

In January 2000, Scholtes was searching for a residential condominium Downtown when she stumbled across a blind ad selling a children's store. Scholtes figured it was Capitol Kids, a young business on South Webster Street about a block off the Square that sells toys, books, games, children's clothing and other kid-related items.

She bought the business in March 2000 and opened it the same day.

Scholtes' daughter, Jenna Hansen, had retail experience and came in to help out her mom, who continued to work as executive director of Family Enhancement for a short time. Hansen, who was pregnant with her second child, already had a couple of part-time jobs and wasn't looking for much more work.

"I said, 'I'll work with you and help you get it started' and I'm still here," said Hansen, sitting in the store surrounded by brightly colored merchandise.

While Hansen's older daughter, Sophia, now 8, was at a child care center, the new baby, Lilah, now 6, came to the store and slept in a bassinet.

The volume of business at the cramped store led Hansen to stay on and eventually quit her other jobs.

It wasn't long before more space was needed and mother and daughter worked together to find and create a new store. It opened just over four years ago at 8 S. Carroll St. on the Square and the bustling business has kept Hansen there.

Hansen, who had worked as an assistant manager and a merchandiser in the natural foods area, is good at coordinating and pulling little pieces together. She had previously worked with her stepfather when he ran Scholtes Seminars and Consulting. Hansen also has experience working in an office of a construction company and a restaurant.

Her mother has used her background in child development. Because she wrote many grants while working at Family Enhancement, Scholtes was comfortable writing the business plan.

Scholtes and Hansen often have different opinions and are not afraid to voice them.

"If we see something and we both like it, we know it's going to be a hit," Hansen said.

Mother and daughter will argue and talk until they resolve an issue.

"When push comes to shove, I concede," Hansen said. "It is her dream."

Mother and daughter, who have always been close, have found disadvantages and advantages of working together but have grown to respect each other.

"We don't have to work at whether we trust each other," Scholtes said.

Hansen said: "I know how she's going to feel about something because she's my mom."

Working together allows both to spend some time with customers.

Hansen, who is detail-oriented, does the work schedule and the daily deposits. She orders the reading books, office supplies and wrapping paper. She orders and displays the "Weird, Wacky Wallace Stocking Stuffers" during the holidays and does most of the merchandising — creating the flow, organization and look of the store.

"I like to start and finish a project," Hansen said. "I like order."

Scholtes finds it easy to look at the big picture and has more of a seamstress eye, which comes in handy when purchasing children's clothing for the store. She does most of the toy buying, the bookwork and creates the window displays. She also handles public relations and advertising and coordinates the nights where a percentage of sales go to designated non-profit organizations.

"I really flourish when it's sort of crazy and wild. I'm not bothered by confusion," Scholtes said.

Scholtes said she gets to see her grandchildren more because they visit the store -- it's called Camp Capitol Kids in the summer -- and the flexibility of owning the business allows her to spend time with her granddaughters.

The flexibility also helps Hansen.

"If her kids are sick, why would I care if she stays home because they're my grandchildren," Scholtes said.

While Hansen has part ownership in the company, she still thinks of Scholtes as the boss and it can be difficult when she's also her mom, which is what she usually calls her at the store. Prospective employees are always told it's a mother-daughter operation.

Intertwining family and business can affect all aspects of life and Hansen said she finds herself spending less time with her mother outside of work.

"When we do, we have to really work hard at not talking about work," Hansen said. "We used to go shopping

together and now if we go shopping together, it's for here."

Hansen's oldest daughter likes to show new toys to other children who come into the store and has led a story hour, making her mother wonder if the third generation might someday join the business.

Hansen's husband, Paul, also does odds and ends for the store.

Scholtes' three other children -- Peter Scholtes, Matt Scholtes and Ben Casbarro, who live out of town, will help during busy periods like Maxwell Street Days and the store-sponsored Easter Parade, which is a large affair with crafts, live animals and stilt walkers.

After the Loraine condominiums were built behind the store, Peg and her husband, Peter Scholtes, moved into a unit that looks into the store and he occasionally will come in and talk to the customers.

"I can look down and see if we're busy and need me to come," Peg Scholtes said.

While the mother-daughter business is flourishing, Hansen knows she won't be there forever and her mother understands that.

"It wasn't her dream," Scholtes said.

Pamela Cotant is a Madison freelance writer.

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