

RELATIVE *ly* SPEAKING

By Ann Zimmerman

FAMILIES WORKING IN BUSINESS TOGETHER HAVE A LONG TRADITION THAT IS EVOLVING INTO NEW DYNAMIC PARTNERSHIPS AS THEY DISCOVER WHAT IT TAKES TO WORK SUCCESSFULLY TOGETHER BOTH IN THE BUSINESS WORLD AND AT HOME.



While the Ma and Pa corner grocery is largely a thing of the past, that doesn't mean there is a decline in family-owned and -operated businesses. Family businesses continue to be important cornerstones of the economy, and that extends to the luxury home industry. Building upon the trust, communication, and family values for hard work at home, family members are creating businesses that rely not only on these commonalities but also on the family members' diverse talents, skills, and training.

Statistics speak to the importance of families in business. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 90 percent of the country's businesses are family-owned or -controlled. Family businesses provide half of the jobs in Europe and America, according to Ernst & Young. Starting a family business is a daring

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thing to do, as during the early years family members sacrifice by working for free or at a lower rate than the external job market would pay for similar skills (Jennifer Xue, *Silicon Valley Globe*). However, as these Whitefish businesses say, the rewards of working together are worth the challenges.

WHJ-FEATURED FLATHEAD VALLEY FAMILY BUSINESSES:



Hunter & Company Interior Design



Bear Mountain Builders



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*-Hunter Dominick,
Hunter & Company
Interior Design*



HUNTER & COMPANY INTERIOR DESIGN



The West lured Hunter Dominick first to the resort areas of Colorado and then to Whitefish, where she owns and operates Hunter & Company Interior Design and her furniture and accessory gallery. However, Hunter traces her creative roots and interest in design to her family roots in southwest Virginia and her father's design business.

“Do what you love, and the rest will follow.” That’s the family message Hunter remembers hearing while growing up, and in many ways it has been the theme of her career. Hunter has always been creative and artistic. She paints, blows glass, and in all ways is a creative artist. One of her early childhood memories is trying to improve upon Scalamandré wallpaper with her colored markers. By the age of seven, Hunter knew she wanted to be an interior designer. “I was just passionate about art, but even then there must have been a streak of practicality,” she recalls. Also, she had the example of her parents.

Hunter describes her father, Mickey Nelson, as a designer who dares to take on unusual projects, projects like the interior of a railroad car. Mickey Nelson attended college first under a football scholarship, and then after he got injured, he transferred to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond and shifted his attention to the university's design school, where he met and married another design student, Hunter's mother, Nancy. Nancy went on to teach children, and Mickey opened his own design studio and showroom.



“YOU WATCH,
AND **YOU LEARN.**”
-HUNTER DOMINICK



“In many ways, my dad's studio was similarly outfitted to my own, with a showroom and resource library. His technical background brought his interior design closer to architecture, as does mine. I helped out and was constantly in and out of the business, and I have to say that it had a huge influence. You watch, and you learn. I saw how he managed to be creative in the confines of a business.”

Hunter was so eager to enter college and begin her design studies that she graduated from high school a year early and was accepted, after a rigorous application process, at Virginia Commonwealth University in the same program her parents attended and where they met. “It was a traditional and in-depth program where we had training on the ins and outs of construction, which has led to my specialty of interior architecture and construction management. I am much more prepared for understanding installations and a much stronger member of design and construction teams.”

Hunter finds that she may have entered design at an ideal time. “My dad is a product of a generation of more artisans and craftsmen. I gained an appreciation for incorporating handcrafted and artist-made pieces in my designs. Where I grew up, just north of the area in North Carolina where so many beautiful furnishings are made, many pieces are

crafted traditionally and by hand. Through my dad's influence and through my own education, I learned the old ways and trades, including the ability to hand-draw plans and sketches. But, I also learned to draw with computers and learned skills that are so difficult for earlier generations to master.”

Hunter Dominick arrived in Whitefish in 2000 and decided to start her design business. “Things then were very Montana rustic. I had seen a shift in Colorado to a more sophisticated elegant mountain look, and I showcased the work of local artists, pieces made in the USA, especially familiar furniture makers from North Carolina, and generally started bringing in new influences that I thought would enhance homes in this area, anticipating that design here would also shift.”

It's a big step to start a business, but Hunter doesn't recall ever being overwhelmed. “I really never thought that it wouldn't work out. I started in a smaller location and made the next steps, in retrospect the right steps, to a larger office and the showroom.”

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Also in retrospect, Hunter sees influences from her father in her business. “There are some architects and designers who have a vision, and their attitude toward the client is ‘take it or leave it.’ My father's approach is that all decisions are made specifically toward and because of the client. The client determines the platform, purpose, and reason. I follow his approach: I make all selections based on the client.” Interestingly, Hunter also finds that her taste is still very similar to her father's. Other parental influences are at work, as well. Hunter describes her mother as a natural teacher, and many who know her and have worked with her will use the same description of Hunter as a down-to-earth natural teacher.

One of the challenges of small, family-owned businesses is setting aside time for family away from work. Did her experiences growing up alter how she manages her home life and family? “I grew up where I didn't sense any separation between work and family. I have young children, and they demand that I put work aside. Plus, I am so busy with their schedules, especially with ski racing. We

downhill and cross-country ski, do a ton of camping, and I love to hike. I love being outside. The connection restores me and the natural world is the source of my design inspiration.”

Hunter and her dad have some crossover now between their businesses. Hunter has jobs on the East Coast and Virginia, and Mickey Nelson has projects in the Flathead Valley. Will there be more collaboration in the future? Hunter won't rule out the possibility and says, “I always thought I would work with my dad.” Also, it's too early to consider whether her children may want to follow her into the business, but they both are highly creative and have shown interest. However, Hunter stresses that whatever they do, it is important that they do something they love, just as she has. “I'm passionate about how space and color influences and affects people's lives.”

And does Hunter have any advice for other families considering going into business together? “Go with your instincts and sign all your own checks,” she says with a laugh. ■

