



The Family Jewels

Sometimes, taking the family *out* of the family business is the best strategy. BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER

WHEN I WAS A little kid and used to ask my dad about his job, he told me he counted paperclips all day and ordered more when it was time. In actuality, he ran Stusser Electric Co., one of the largest electrical supplies distributors on the West Coast.

The company was founded by my grandfather, Leslie Stusser, who put his shingle up on Third and Madison in 1919. After both my father, Herb, and my Uncle Pat went to Stanford University and served stints in the military, Leslie's lads came home to work for their dad. The business grew into a powerhouse, selling to Boeing and helping build the Kingdome and the Alaska Boondoggle ... er, Pipeline.

I, too, worked summers at Stusser Electric, stocking shelves, learning about wattage and breakers and how to drive a forklift into things. The summer before college, I was put under the tutelage of a grizzled, bearded, lumberjack of a man named Rab, who ran the wire department. Union all the way, Rab had been with the company for 20-plus years and taught me about inventory, wire gauge and how to make the most of three 15-minute coffee breaks. He also had a way of asking direct questions—like whether I could see myself running an electrical wholesaling firm. It got me thinking about the big picture.

In this town, family businesses abound: Nordstroms work for Nordstrom, Goldfarbs take over Goldfarb's, Blethens run *The Seattle Times* and Bartells keep the pharmacy chain going. The question in our own family was which kid, if any, might take over the ship.

Uncle Pat had three girls, and they weren't interested in running the family biz. We have three kids on our side, too. My older sis, Pam, worked in the business for years, but though she clearly had the brains, she was never put on the fast track; the middle brother, Alan, let's just say, wasn't suited for the job—or *any* job, for that matter. That left me, the prince, as last heir to take over the family throne. The 10-ton elephant

in the room was whether I would join after graduating college.

The plan started to go off course when I accepted an offer to attend the University of California at Berkeley. I might have considered the more conservative family legacy, Stanford, but it failed to let me in, perhaps after reading my satirical and irreverent entrance essay.

Like my father's father, my dad paid for my college education, but our contract was never *quid pro quo*. Four years of Cal pointed me on a different path from selling electrical supplies. My choices after college were between an environmental group (CalPIRG) and Club Med. I chose to help save the planet, and my father's influence was all over that decision. (He and my mother had introduced me to Mount Rainier National Park and many other awe-inspiring wilderness areas through the day-hikes they forced me to take on weekends.)

Looking back, I realize that my father's lack of pressure was the most noble thing he'd done for me. Knowing who I was, he was letting me be me, and his generosity allowed me to be a not-so-starving artist.

As it turned out, Pops and his brother sold the biz for a bundle in 1993, and it was a win-win for all involved. Where my lack of interest may have driven the empire into the ground, the lack of an heir forced his hand and got him out just in time. But I can tell you this: If things had turned out differently and the old man was still toiling away at 76, competing with Home Depot over pennies, I'm not sure my conscience would have allowed me to stay out of the kingdom. **SBM**

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