

What They've Learned

Words of wisdom from entrepreneurial alumni

Growing a Family Business

Joe and Kathy Hickson

Interview by Charles Creekmore

Joe: We worked for a greenhouse company for six months, having a very successful run. With over a million dollars in deposits on projects, the company suddenly went under.

Kathy: We were very friendly with all these people whose deposits we had sent to the company. Our customers asked us if there was any way we could possibly finish their greenhouses for them.

Joe: So Kathy and I decided it was up to us to make good on our deposits and on our word. They gave us their money and we gave them our word. So what we did was finish every project. Private Gardens was started.

Make Good on Your Word

Kathy: We ran our new business at first out of our family room with two little babies crawling under the table. By keeping our word, it started a mushroom effect. The people we helped out were so impressed with our efforts that they started referring us to business colleagues.

Joe: To this day, 23 years later, some of those same first customers remember us making good on our word, and they've become lifelong customers and dear friends. Frankly, we didn't even make any profit from finishing those projects, but it created our new business.

Have a Plan

Kathy: Our business plan was to find the finest greenhouses made in the world, work with the

manufacturers of those greenhouses to design and private-label these products under Private Garden in the United States. Challenging projects ranged from a 500,000-square-foot growing greenhouse in Texas, to a greenhouse on the 16th floor roof at Columbia University in New York City. The elevators weren't large enough to transport the materials to the rooftop; we had to supply a 16-story exterior crane. Our production facilities are in Izegem, Belgium, so we had the material shipped from the Port of Rotterdam to New York, then trucked to downtown Manhattan. We had to close down the street via permits and hire police officers for the unloading, then crane the entire greenhouse piece by piece. The logistics were challenging.

Building Character

Joe: Much of the success in our business has to do with the education we received at UMass Amherst. It prepared us to deal with the world.

Kathy: Dr. Tony Borton PhD, retired professor of Veterinary and Animal Science, taught me analytical skills, thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and provided a solid education. Those skills and education are so important when developing character and professionalism.

Joe: I've had a couple of mentors who helped in shaping my career. One was Bob Pickett, who eventually became head football coach at UMass Amherst. Coach

Pickett taught me the importance of character building and keeping my word. Although the company that we had worked for went out of business we had given clients our word to provide a product for their hard-earned money. We felt committed. This attitude and sense of responsibility was the way Kathy and I were raised by our parents and mentored by Coach Pickett and Dr. Borton. We were taught to take charge.

Making the Generation Gap Work

Joe: The first year our kids arrived in the business was a tough transition for me. As the dad, it was my way or the highway, but then I began to realize that my kids are very intelligent. Their ethics and morals are identical to ours, but they had their opinions. We might not always be coming from the same direction, but in the end we always get to the same goal.

Kathy: With our son, daughter, and son-in-law in the business, there's a generation gap, we're old-fashioned. Our kids have a different kind of education, a younger perspective, and fresh energy level. The kids have added new skills and a keen sense of analytical thinking to our business team. Now we are ready to welcome the third generation and even younger thinking: we have a grandson due on July 4th. Our business is a mix of several people with wildly diverse educational backgrounds, skills, and ages. Sunday dinners are great!

Joe '77 and Kathy (Darcy) '79 Hickson started their greenhouse business in 1984 on a wing and a prayer, with a \$200 loan. Now their company, Private Garden, is the leading garden center design firm and manufacturer in the country. The company has built more than 15 million square feet of commercial greenhouses in the past 15 years, and installed more than 700 private conservatories and glasshouses in the last decade. Private Garden is a family business, run by Joe, Kathy, their son, Joseph, their daughter, Jennifer Darcy Sackrider, and their son-in-law, Peter Sackrider.

