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FASHIONING A FAMILY BUSINESS

When Richards opened in 2000, it Was named "best new store in the World" at the retail design awards competition.

Pause

YOU ARE HERE HOME INSIDE FASHIONING A FAMILY BUSINESS

Written by

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Photographs by Sinéad Deane
Additional images courtesy of the Mitchells Family of Stores

Fashioning the family business

Jack Mitchell guides the next generation

A dapper Jack Mitchell crosses his legs and turns his bespectacled eyes toward a wall of framed family portraits and yellowed clippings in a back office at Richards on Greenwich Avenue. He and his brother, Bill – whom Jack calls “Mr. Westport” – serve as co-CEOs of the Mitchells Family of Stores, an enduring local retail business with more than \$100 million in sales annually. The two men took over the family business from their parents, Ed and Norma Mitchell, who in 1958 opened Mitchells, a specialty retail shop, in a small space in Westport that was once a plumbing supply store.

Fifty-four years later, the third-generation business has acquired other beloved family stores, including the now 27,000-square-foot Richards of Greenwich, Marshs of Huntington, L.I., and the Wilkes Bashford stores in San Francisco and Palo Alto, Calif.

“My role is changing as is my brother’s,” Jack says. Soon he’ll assume the position of chairman as nine family members continue to dedicate themselves to the family business.

The stores have been recognized with a lengthy list of fashion industry and store design accolades. When Richards opened in 2000, it was named “best new store in the world” at the Retail Design Awards competition. In 2009, Jack and Bill were honored with the Retailing Hall of Fame Award by MR magazine, the menswear publication.

But an award with a different significance will be presented next month to the entire Mitchell clan at Greenwich Hospital’s annual gala, recognizing not only the family’s work with the hospital but also with the greater Greenwich community.

“I believe they’re doing it because we’re very, very active in the community,” Jack says with a smile before listing countless organizations his family and stores are involved with, like Sound Waters, the Boys & Girls Club, the Red Cross and Breast Cancer Alliance.

“We’ve always felt that we were part of the community,” says Jack, remembering how his father would hand out free coffee and copies of The New York Times at the train station to get to know the locals and attract business. “I think that is a good reflection of my mom and my dad.”

While Jack would appear to be a poster guy for the retail biz – sporting a dark Brioni suit, a Kiton shirt, an Ermenegildo Zegna tie and Edward Green shoes – he says with a laugh that “the biggest thing that’s happened this year is a much trimmer fit, and I’m not a good example. I lost 25 pounds and I have to get this suit refit.”

Nevertheless, the smiling Jack looks on-point and commands attention when he leans in and promises, “I’ll give you the family lowdown.”

They are family

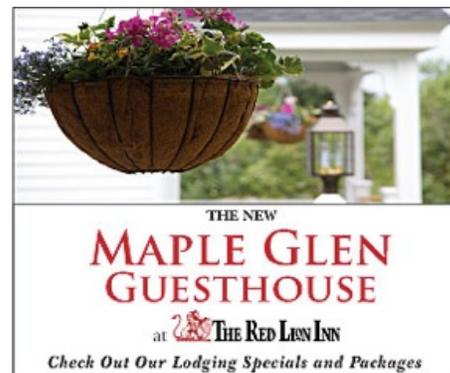
Jack, a resident of Wilton, has four children and seven grandchildren. Bill has three children and five grandchildren.

“We’re working on the fourth generation, which is coming along,” Jack says, referring to a recent family wedding in Napa Valley.

“We don’t like any rules,” Jack says, “but we do have two rules in our business. The first one is that they (his and Bill’s children) had to work five years somewhere else after they left college.”

Adhering to this rule, two of the kids, co-presidents Russell and Bob, worked for IBM in Boston and Sports Illustrated before joining the family business in 1990. Russell is “in charge of anything analytical” and Bob “grew up on the selling floor, so he’s in charge of all the buying, merchandising and the selling process.”

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But Jack admits, “The rule didn’t apply to me.”

He was raised in Westport and attended Staples High School – where he met his future wife, Linda, also in the family business – receiving his B.A. from Wesleyan University. Jack went west to the University of California at Berkeley (“I have a master’s in Chinese history, of all things”) and then spent six years honing his business skills at The New England Institute for Medical Research in Ridgefield.

“My brother came right in from college,” he says, noting that his parents had a “very easy” time handing the company to Jack and Bill.

“My parents were in their mid-50s when they started the business, so by the time Bill came in ’65 and then I came... in ’69, they were really ready.”

But, he adds, “they continued to work in the business up until my mom passed away when she was 86 and my dad, right up until about six months before he passed away. He was almost 99,” which might explain why no Mitchell is making moves to slow down anytime soon.

But with the third generation – or “My 3 Gs,” as Jack calls his kids and nephews – geared to take over the business, a second rule also applies.

“The second rule is that there had to be a real job,” Jack says. “In other words, (children) weren’t entitled to a job. So they had to have the skill sets and the desire and the passion for whatever position we needed them for. It just so happened that they all had different positions.”

“Scott manages the women’s business here, plus the jewelry and really is the Mitchell persona of the store and he lives in Greenwich,” Jack continues. Meanwhile, Chris is the manager of Marsh’s, Tyler leads the California stores and Andrew runs marketing efforts.

“We try to run our business as a business first and a family second.”

Just one of Jack’s sons – Todd, Andrew’s twin – left the business to take a “very fine position” at St. Vincent’s Hospital and Jack jokes, “he’s still in very good standing because he’s a stockholder.”

“We gifted the business to our sons so they really own the business,” Jack says, “and then we have a lot of great nonfamily people.”

This is the integral component that helps the Mitchells Family of Stores maintain its status as service-minded retailer of luxury designer apparel and accessories.

Service with a hug

Jack, who is dyslexic and an avid writer, first detailed his dedication to personalized customer service in “Hug Your Customers: The Proven Way to Personalize Sales and Achieve Astounding Results.” His next book of advice was “Hug Your People: The Proven Way to Hire, Inspire, and Recognize Your Employees and Achieve Remarkable Results.”

As Jack says, “If you hug your people, then they hug their customers. I realized just like that that not everybody does hug their customers. For us, a hug can be a bear hug, but it’s really a metaphor for any tiny or major act or deed that says, ‘Wow, these folks really care about me as a real person.’ And when you do that and you connect, people come back, and they come back for life.”

“Great people, that’s our competitive edge....We want to be visible. Try calling Richards after hours and you’ll get Scott’s voice mail and it says, ‘If it’s a clothing emergency, press two,’ and Scott and somebody in our family will come down and meet you.”

Scott is full of one-of-a-kind stories of quick fixes he did to save a customer’s day on anniversaries, birthdays, weddings and even on Christmas Day.

Jack remembers that at a high-profile wedding “all of the sudden, the groomsmen, of course who we had done the tuxedos for, are all at the Hyatt, and no one knows how to tie a bow tie.”

“It’s Saturday afternoon, the wedding’s in an hour,” Scott chimes in.

“Scott is the designated bow-tie here,” Jack proudly asserts.

Scott leans in. “Seventeen years of playing the cello and you learn how to tie a bow tie.”

“And we tied all the ties that day. So little things like that, people know that we all do it, and that we all will stand behind it and those are the things that make customers feel like friends,” Jack says. “I call it ‘the hugging culture,’ because you know what he did was a hug for seven or eight guys.”

“It’s not in the job description,” Jack notes before Scott interjects, “But sure it is. It is in the job description in the sense that we... every single one on my team... is enabled and empowered to exceed their customer’s expectations.”

“We have a passion and it’s ingrained from grandfather to father and uncle to the next generation,” Scott says. “But everyone else has to have as much passion, dedication and desire to want to succeed... so my role is taking care of the people and motivating them and keeping them happy. I get to do both. I get the yellow book and the blue book,” he adds, referring to Jack’s book covers.

Jack adds, “They do come in because we sell great product, but they come back after meeting great (salespeople) like Scott and Debbie and Frank and John and they leave happy. And we call them up and ask, ‘Are you happy?’”

At the Mitchells Family of Stores, the answer is always “Yes.”

Hugs in motion

“How long do you think I’ve been working here?” John Hickey III, Richards Ermenegildo Zegna specialist, asks for you. “Thirty-four years,” he answers, telling the story of how his father worked at Richards across the street before the Mitchells bought it 17 years ago.

“He was in this business his entire life,” Hickey remembers, adding that “when I was a little kid, I was the only one in my family of seven boys who took the least bit of interest... In this business, you either have it or you don’t. You have to have the passion and really want to do it, because there’s no faking it.”

Jack Mitchell adds, “Well, and as John said, there was a real heritage with John and his father and we’re proud of it, too. His father retired soon after we purchased the business with great dignity and pride.”

“Yeah, there was that nice little party,” Hickey says with a chuckle. In following his father’s footsteps, Jack adds, “John has become one of the top sellers in the United States of America in menswear.”

Standing nearby is Michele Penque, who works with Scott Mitchell to manage women’s apparel. The camaraderie is instantly apparent.

She loves working closely with Scott, because “we both bring a different energy... we complement each other so much in our way of working that it’s fun to be together. ... and every customer knows him and everybody loves him.”

Although Penque is a relatively new employee (some have been with the company for 48 years), she comes well-versed in the luxury-driven retail market from her days at Neiman’s and Bergdorf’s. But, she says, the secret sauce to the Mitchell success story is family – “and they include us like we’re part of their family and that’s what’s amazing. That’s what makes it different when everyone is carrying the same merchandise.”

Walking around Richards elegant staircase, Jack stops to give a congratulatory hug to 15-year-old Scarsdale resident Justin Schmerler, who just bought his first suit with his dad, Charles. After Jack jokingly pokes and pries, Justin says he wants to wear the suit out to the theater, although his dad quips, “He just wants to wear it out of the store.”

“I feel a lot more mature,” the proud buyer says. “I loved coming here when I was a little kid, because they always had cookies for me and I could watch the TV.”

Buying a great, tailored investment suit is a special moment often shared by young men and their fathers, and around here, the friendly, detail-oriented team at Richards makes it a memorable experience.

Although Charles offered fellow fathers this advice on the great coming-of-age ceremony: “Make sure your son is finished growing.”

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