

OCTOBER 2010 \$5.00

# Earnshaw's

INFANTS', GIRLS' & BOYS' WEAR REVIEW



## Polished Presentation

Infant & Toddler Fashion Reflects A More Tailored Aesthetic

**Support System**  
The Sling Industry Rallies to Promote Safety

**Lasting Impression**  
Petunia Pickle Bottom's Powerful Persona

# FAMILY AFFAIR

Children's wear vendors consider what roles their sons and daughters might play in the future of their businesses.  
By Cara Clinton

**MUCH OF THE** children's wear industry is about family—celebrating new arrivals and dressing little ones for milestone moments. So it's only natural that as business proprietors look to the future, they look to their own kids—many of whom have grown up as these companies matured—for signs that they're willing and able to take the reins one day. In some cases, offspring yearn to go out and make their own mark before returning to the fold. Others know from the start that the family business is their calling. Although the transition from kid to colleague can take some adjustment, parents often find their children bring a wealth of experience and a fresh perspective to the companies they've so lovingly built.

Laurie Snyder, president of Flap Happy in Santa Monica, Calif., has four kids between the ages of 12 and 23 (the line was originally created for her oldest son, Cody), and said she would love to have any of them join the business—provided it's of their own volition. It's a real possibility: Her 15-year-old son, Logan, has expressed an interest in fashion, and her daughter, Kelly, spent the spring studying in Cape Town and hopes to collaborate with Flap Happy to establish sewing factories in the Congo to empower the local women. Snyder's other two children have begun separate careers, but they are keeping their options open. "They know there's a future here for them if they want it, but they'll be more appreciative of the way things are run here once they've worked at other places," Snyder explained.

For husband-and-wife team Michael and Uli Belenky, who launched the Zutano brand 22 years ago, work and life have always

intertwined. After starting the company in their New York apartment, the couple moved to a 70-acre farm in Cabot, Vt., where they could keep the business on their property and still spend time with their two daughters, Sofia and Ella. "There are so many demands pulling you away from family today, so being able to keep our offices close to home was a benefit," Michael said.

Now that the girls are 21 and 19, the question of whether they will join Zutano is on everyone's mind. Sofia, a senior at Studio Arts at Bard College in New York (where Ella also studies), is helping merchandise Zutano's FAO Schwarz shop-in-shop this fall. After that, she thinks she'd like to play a role in the business she's grown up with, but her parents want her to be absolutely sure before taking that leap. "Both of our girls are very creative, with tremendous skills and possibilities," said Michael, "but we feel they need the opportunity to follow their own path."

## CONTEMPORARY WISDOM

Le Top founders Chris and Paul Lun encouraged their children to do the same. Though their older kids opted for culinary and legal careers, their youngest, Melissa, joined the company this year. She wanted to join the family business after college, but her parents weren't sure she was ready. So Melissa first pursued a public relations career in Los Angeles. She later moved to New York, where she founded the global PR division of the fashion communications firm Starworks and served as the senior communications manager for Tommy Hilfiger, among other roles.

Melissa's market knowledge and publicity skills serve her well in her new role as communications director for the Richmond, Calif.-based brand. She launched e-commerce sites for both Le Top and the company's second brand, Rabbit Moon. What's more, she has opened her parents' eyes to the power of social media. "The first thing Melissa did was set up a company Facebook page," Chris said. "She brought an awareness of how important social media is to retail these days."

Jeno Kalozdi (who goes by his nickname, Kicker) is applying similar knowledge to his family's 37-year-old business, Kalencom Corp. At just 25 years old, he has joined his parents, Monica and Jeno Kalozdi Sr., at the New Orleans-headquartered juvenile products manufacturer. Kicker became an employee of the family business last January and dove right in, spearheading the website development for Kalencom's Hadaki division. He's also had the chance to put his marketing degree and MBA in international business to good use. But most importantly, his mother said, he brings a vital contemporary edge. "For any company to really survive it has to stay current—especially in a fashion-oriented business," said Monica, who is a partner at Kalencom along with her husband. "Kicker brings his youth and knowledge of new technology like Facebook and Twitter, which for my generation were nonexistent."

Likewise, Marcia Levine, president of Jamari Ltd., a U.S. importer of European children's clothing, said her son Jared has kept them up-to-date in terms of technology and fashion trends. Since joining the New York-based company as vice president, he has expanded its corporate showrooms, customer base and collections. "Jared brings his youthful energy and drive to provide the best brands and the highest level of customer service," said Marcia, adding that his skills complement her 22-year industry background. "We have a similar mindset, with a very strong work ethic."

Jared's determination and enthusiasm helps as well. "When I was 12 years old, I was sorting hangers," he said. "Mom encouraged me to do anything other than the clothing business, but there was no stopping me. I knew I wanted to be here."



Clockwise from top left: Chris and Paul Lun of LeTop. Laurie Snyder, president of Flap Happy, with her son Cody. Siblings Charlotte and Michael Rashti. Zutano co-owner Michael Belenky with his daughters. Rob and Shelley Hunt of Skivvydoodles. The Wee Ones team: Miles Faust, Barbara Agatstein and Betsy McPherson. Marcia and Jared Levine of Jamari. Kalencom partner Monica Kalozdi with her son Kicker.



## TIES THAT BIND

Working with like-minded people is just one of the positive aspects of a family-run business. The team also naturally shares the same goal: to have a thriving operation that benefits everyone involved.

Kicker—who jokes that he's been working for Kalencom since he was "in the womb"—said the biggest advantage is that he gets to share his accomplishments with people he loves. "There is a true passion for this because it is our family 'thing'—I could never get that experience working in any other environment," he said. "When we are successful it benefits the entire family and our city of New Orleans, which we are very dedicated to." That passion has served Kicker well. He even started his own Kalencom division, a line of paintball gear bags called RatCo, at the early age of 17.

Michael Rashti, CEO of Rashti & Rashti in New York, noted there are several advantages that come from being a third-generation family business. (His sister, Charlotte, is the company's president.) For him, the greatest was getting hands-on training from the company's leaders—his father and grandfather, who started the business (then known as Harry J. Rashti & Co. Inc.) in the 1950s. "The three of us used to drive into Manhattan, about an hour-and-fifteen-minute ride each way. I heard many of their discussions firsthand and observed how they developed strategies to grow the business—outside the daily grind of the office."

Sometimes the information flows in the opposite direction. In fact, plenty of vendors founded their business after being specifically inspired by their children and/or wanting to answer their specific needs. This was the case for My Boy Sam/Skivvydoodles of New Milford, Conn. "When we adopted our son Sam, [my wife] Shelley wanted to have a line of fun boys' clothes, so she started My Boy Sam," recalled Rob Hunt, the brand's co-founder. Four years later, the couple adopted their son Jacob, who Rob said inspired their second brand, And Then There Was Jake. "Other lines came about from recognizing what was missing in the market," he added. "Like great cotton pajamas in a full fit—hence Skivvydoodles."

Sam hasn't expressed a desire to join the company (he's currently in culinary school), but Jacob showed interest at an early age, Rob said. Jacob even designed one of the sweaters in the company's latest line, Artwalk. "From the time he was little, Jacob was fascinated with trade shows," Rob said. "This little voice would get on my phone and say something like, 'So, how are the bookings?' I don't know if he wants this for his future, but [since he's only] 16, we have time to make those decisions."

The seed for Barbara Agatstein's company also came from her child. Agatstein began making barrettes to tame her daughter Betsy's unruly hair, and her concept grew into the children's accessories company Wee Ones. Although Betsy McPherson never planned to work for Wee Ones, she joined in 2000, learned every aspect of the business and later became its president.

For this mother/daughter pair, remaining true to the family brand meant exposing it to outside expertise. In July, the decided to sell the assets of their company to Miles Faust, a consumer products industry veteran. "I've been running the business for 10 years, but I am 36 years old; I don't have the skills that Miles has," Betsy said. Still, the pair remains involved in the business they cultivated, with Betsy staying on as president and Barbara assuming the role of chief design officer. "We are excited about the future," Betsy said.

## WHEN IT COMES TO NAVIGATING THE FAMILY BUSINESS...

**DO** set clear goals and expectations of each other. Revisit this list often and, as with everything, expect it to change.

—MICHAEL RASHTI,  
CEO, Rashti & Rashti

**DO** define the times when you are going to discuss business and times when you are not. —CHRIS LUN,  
vice president, Le Top

**DO** realize that you may have to establish different boundaries for different people in your life.

—LAURIE SNYDER,  
president, Flap Happy

**DON'T** be afraid to bring in expert help from outside the family—even if it means bypassing a family member. —MICHAEL RASHTI

**DON'T** take over the family business if it is not what you want to do.

—ROB HUNT,  
co-founder, My Boy Sam/  
Skivvydoodles

**DON'T** go to bed angry.

—SHELLEY HUNT,  
co-founder, My Boy Sam/  
Skivvydoodles

## MAKING IT WORK

An outside party can be an important mediator at times, considering that a workplace shared by family members also faces some unique challenges. Among the biggest is managing expectations as the relationship takes on a professional angle. It's not always easy for a mother and son, for example, to shift into boss/employee mode, or turn the switch from on to off when the day's work is done. Kicker of Kalencom—a self-proclaimed "mama's boy"—said with a laugh that now that he works with his mother, he's sometimes reluctant to answer the phone when she calls, because he doesn't know if she wants to speak to him as his mom or his boss.

Though the lines between business and family can blur at times, close connection is critical in a world where business moves at such a rapid speed, said Michael Rashti. "One of the keys to maintaining a strong working relationship is to meet and talk regularly and keep discussions open and candid." Communication has also been important to the success of Jamari, said Marcia Levine. The secret is respecting each other and avoiding egos and power plays. "We almost always agree on issues, and when we don't, we either quickly compromise or one simply defers to the other," she said.

Straight shooting works for Snyder of Flap Happy, who at one point had her mother, sister and aunt involved in the business. "There were some unspoken expectations and we went through a rough time," Snyder admitted. Now, with that period behind them, her mother still attends trade shows on occasion, and Snyder recently began working with a close friend on her new boys' line, Kai Bean.

"Our family has spoken numerous times about the need to separate our relationships," said Chris Lun of Le Top. In addition to working with her daughter, Chris' sister works in the company's sales department, and her two other children used to be involved, too. "We are not always 100-percent successful, but we rarely mix conversations about family and business." Melissa went as far as to draw

up an agreement with her parents that said if their work relationship affected their family life, Melissa's role in the company would dissolve. But so far, so good, Melissa reported, noting that she hopes that track record will continue. "My husband would love to know that the business didn't end because we decided to end it," said Chris Lun. "Whether it was one of our children or one of our close employees [stepping up to the helm], it would be really fulfilling for us to think the business would go on." •