60 YEARS, TWO STORES AND LOTS OF SPARKLE

Family-owned Paul's Jewelry celebrates 60 years in Lafayette and of working together

By Kris Wartelle | kwartelle@theadvertiser.com

After growing up working in his parents’ business, PJ Naomi has plenty of stories about the good old days at Paul’s Jewelry. But he won’t share all of the them.

For instance, he remembers the biggest sale he ever made — a pink diamond bracelet and matching ring worth well over $500,000 — he won’t reveal who bought them.

His parents, Theresa and Paul Jacob Naomi, started the business in 1954. Both were born and raised in Lafayette and spent their lives here.

Today, PJ, his son Jacob and his two sisters Patty and Nancy run the two Paul’s Jewelry locations, one in the Oil Center and another in River Ranch.

The family is celebrating the 60-year anniversary of the business, as well as the fact that they have worked together as a family for so long.

“We all have our professional differences,” said Patty Naomi. “But there is still that underlying love and respect for each other. So it’s different, but there is real strength being in a family business.”

Another longtime Lafayette business owner, Edward ‘Brother’ Abdalla has known PJ Naomi all of his life.

The Naomis and Abdallas were friends and business colleagues. Abdalla remembered when the original Abdalla’s department store, started by his father Edward, was right down the street from the original Paul’s Jewelry downtown.

“My father and his father were very good friends,” Abdalla recalled. “Whenever we couldn’t find my dad, we’d go look for him in the back of Paul’s Jewelry and that’s where my daddy would be, hanging out, drinking coffee or talking politics.”

Abdalla, who also grew up in a family retail business, knows what it is like to work with family members. He said that part of the job is not always easy and the tradition doesn’t...
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always continue.

"It doesn’t always translate to the second or third generation. But they have done it and I have to give it to them," Abdalla said. "They gel really well together and they seem to be very successful at it. They all work well together so, I admire them really do."

All three Naomi siblings grew up working for their parents. They remember polishing silver on weekends and doing errands after school.

"Saturday was silver cleaning day," PJ Naomi recalled. "I used to walk from school during the week to go to work and on weekends we polished silver. We all had our chores."

"I had to work," said Patty with a laugh. "Or they wouldn’t feed me."

PJ, the eldest son, started engraving jewelry when he was 12 and worked in the store while he was in school. He went to work full time in 1972, after he graduated from the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He worked alongside his father, who started the business shortly after he returned home from serving in World War II.

"He had three (jewelry) cases when he started," PJ Naomi said. "One for watches, one for engagement rings and one for every day jewelry. Mother loved the gift ware so she added the silverware, carnival glass, crystal and some china patterns."

He said his parents never really retired from the business. In fact, his father Jacob came into the store almost every day until he passed away at age 87.

Today, PJ Naomi concentrates on the jewelry sales, while his sister Patty does the buying and his sister, Nancy does the accounting.

"All three of us said we’d never work at Paul’s," said Patty Naomi. "And one by one, we all came back into the business."

PAUL'S HISTORY

> 1954: Theresa and Paul Jacob Naomi started Paul’s on Jefferson Street in downtown Lafayette in the current Pamplona’s building.

> 1960s: Paul’s moved near Dwyer’s.

> 1992: Paul’s moved to the present Oil Center Drive location.

> 2005: Paul’s opened a second location on Camellia Blvd. in River Ranch.

> Also: Other charitable causes supported by Paul’s include Hospice of Acadiana, Acadiana Heart Association, Go Red Banquet, The Miles Perret Center, MDA’s Passport to a Cure, Louisiana Man & Woman of the Year for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, The Lafayette Community Health Care Clinic and Silver Bell Soiree.

Jacob Naomi, 29, is the newest addition. He’s been on the job for about three years. He also remembers his first big sale — a five-carat diamond engagement ring a man bought for his fiancee.

"I was shaking," said Jacob. "It was a beautiful stone and a gorgeous setting. First-class all the way."

"You see a young couple and you think maybe (they want) a half carat or a carat," Naomi said. "But sometimes you are just so surprised. It comes out of nowhere."

As a salesman specializing in high end luxury items, PJ Naomi has seen the highs and lows of the business. He remembers when Lafayette was in the thick of the oil boom in the 1970s and ‘80s.

"There was a group called the office," Naomi recalled. "The guys would come in every Christmas Eve and do their Christmas shopping. It was about a two-hour buying spree for these guys and they’d buy diamonds for their wives and other kinds of jewelry."

The family also remembers when the oil markets crashed in the 1980s. Somehow, Paul’s Jewelry made it through that era as well, at a time when not many were buying expensive jewelry.

"We just learned to be conservative," said Patty Naomi. "Buy sparingly, and only things that we knew we could sell."

The youngest of the three siblings, Patty Naomi, also graduated from UL but became a teacher at Northside High School. She said she never expected to end up in the jewelry business. Now, she believes she has the best job of all.

"I realized what a fabulous opportunity I had to work with jewelry," she said. "Sometimes it takes having another job to make you realize that. I get to spend my days buying jewelry. Is there anything more wonderful than that?"

The family made a huge step forward several years ago, when it opened a new location in River Ranch.

"It was scary at first," said Karen Daigle, a former TV news anchor and PJ Naomi’s wife. "Any time you put yourself out there, there is a chance it will work and a chance it will not. It just made sense to have a second location there because of growth in area. And it has been phenomenal."

Daigle said what is remarkable is that, as successful as Paul’s has been, the store is basically still a family business and one of their core beliefs is giving back to the community.

"I don’t know another business their size that gives the amount they do," Daigle said. "They absolutely believe in giving back and it is paramount to their success.

As they look to the future, the family said they don’t see much about the store’s original mission changing. So far the family has resisted the move towards selling items online.

"I think jewelry is truly a personal purchase," PJ Naomi said. "It’s a celebration of people’s lives. It’s a romantic thing to be able to look at a piece of jewelry and put it in your hands and see how it looks."

"I love being able to help a guy choose the perfect ring," said Naomi’s son Jacob. "It means so much. It’s so special."