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Cervera Real Estate's Veronica Cervera Goeseke, Alicia Cervera Sr. and Alicia Cervera Lamadrid

# Mom & Co.

## HOW MOTHERS AND THEIR OFFSPRING COME TOGETHER TO CREATE THRIVING BUSINESSES

BY MARTIN LENKOWKY

Sometimes it can be a challenge keeping one's family and business life separate, especially if you happen to work with – or for – your mom.

In this issue, SFBW honors Mother's Day by featuring the relationships between moms and their children who not only have found ways to work together, but have been able to build on that relationship to create successful, flourishing business environments.

### CERVERA REAL ESTATE

Alicia Cervera Sr. founded her eponymous real estate firm in 1969. Now,

both her daughters have instrumental positions within the company: Veronica Cervera is company CEO, and her sister, Alicia Cervera Jr., is managing partner.

Being a close-knit family is what brought the founder's daughters into the business. "Mom started her company and she needed help," says Alicia. "Veronica joined first, right out of college."

Both Alicia and Veronica had other jobs prior to joining their mom's thriving business. "I worked at McDonald's when I was 15," Alicia says, describing it as an excellent learning experience for later in life. "You learn teamwork and the

principles of working."

Alicia sees both advantages and disadvantages working closely with family. "We never argue about money; there's a lot of trust," she says. However, sometimes it does get hard to separate business and family. "There's a danger of never turning it off," she explains. "You can wind up talking about the office 24/7. You have to remember that at the end of the day, work is work. Also, if you have a horrible day at work and then have to attend a family birthday party, you have to remember to hand them a gift and not throw it at them!"

There's another upside when working at your mom's company, Alicia says. "When our kids were smaller, it was invaluable to work in a family setting. For example, when the kids got chickenpox, it was easier to call out sick."

Alicia credits her mom's mentoring for teaching them the job, which began at an early age. "We used to play a game while riding in the car. We'd point out the 'for sale' signs," she says, adding, "From early on, I had access to high-level meetings. Mom didn't like going to meetings by herself."

### SAPOZNIK INSURANCE

Rachel Sapoznik's children were the catalyst when she decided to form her own insurance agency 30 years ago. "They're the reason I have the business," she says. "I was working for Hancock at the time and I got fired. They didn't have maternity leave, and I couldn't keep up with their quotas. I created Sapoznik Insurance from my home so I could take care of my kids."

Her son, Isaac, was only 2 at the time, and his brother, Michael, was a newborn. Now, both sons work with their mother. "When Isaac was little, he would come

to work with me on his days off from school," Rachel says. When he grew up, he attended the University of Florida and got a job working for Gallagher Insurance. "About a year later, he said, 'Mom, I'm ready to come to Sapoznik Insurance.'" Michael, on the other hand, joined the family business just two months ago after living in Israel.

At first, the working dynamics were very difficult. "It was hard to separate the mother-son relationship from the CEO-employee relationship," Rachel says. "Isaac would think I was disappointed in him. He wanted me to be proud of him."

To make sure Isaac received the full benefit of mentoring at work, a third party was required, Rachel says. "I hired a business coach – a buffer initially."

As the years went on, a wonderful working relationship ensued. "We have developed a great line of communication, which has expanded the business exponentially," Rachel says. "It's OK if we don't always agree on something. You can always work together to find the right path."

It's sometimes not easy to separate business and family life. "When we're at work, we engage in normal business conversation," Rachel says. "When we travel as a family, we try to keep business conversation to a minimum."

### FERNANDA'S INTERNATIONAL MARKET AND CAFÉ

Fernanda's International Market and Café had been in existence for years when the Johasky family purchased the Fort Lauderdale business about 10 years ago. Bethany runs the business; her mother, Leslie, starting working for her in February.

It was Leslie's husband who bought Fernanda's. "We were customers and loved it," she says. "We loved the food, the



Fernanda's International Market and Café's Bethany and Leslie Johasky

international flavor and their involvement in the community. It all says a lot for the product and the quality."

Both women say they've found the perfect combination of skill and experience to work together. Bethany is the "foodie," and Leslie, who worked for Neiman Marcus for 22 years in Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton, offers many years of retail experience to the mix.

Back when she was a student at Florida State University, Bethany worked at a coffee shop, as well as bars and restaurants. "I never saw myself at a desk job," she says, adding that working with her mom has been a great learning experience and that her mother's retail acumen has helped the business improve.

"Bethany and I have always had a great relationship," Leslie says. "We make a good team – my sense of retail and her knowledge of food."

Both mother and daughter say they have no problem separating their business and family life. "We don't really separate it," Leslie says. "We enjoy the time we spend together. When we're here, we work; when not, we just enjoy our family."

Does her daughter work her too hard? "I like the work and I enjoy it," Leslie says. "When customers come in with food questions, Bethany can give them



Michael, Rachel and Isaac Sapoznik of Sapoznik Insurance



Levy Group's Adam Levy and Wendy Levy-Jackson

the answers.”

### THE LEVY GROUP

When her son, Adam Levy, joined her Pinecrest real estate firm, he brought with him a unique skill to the profession, says Wendy Levy-Jackson, who started the business 35 years ago. After he attended the University of South Florida, Adam built homes. “It separates him from most Realtors,” Wendy says.

“I can explain what’s behind the walls to the buyer,” Adam adds.

So what made her son decide to transition from building homes to selling them? “He had been working on a job site in Boca Raton that had been going downhill,” Wendy says. “He knew I’d been talking about hiring an assistant; he came to me and said, ‘I want to be that assistant.’”

According to Wendy, Adam coming on board helped the business in many ways. “The business was doing well, but it was getting more technical,” she says. “Adam coming in seemed like

a great opportunity.”

In addition to her son’s computer/tech-savvy skills, she found they complement each other as sales partners. “It’s the ‘man-woman,’ ‘younger-older,’ thing,” she says. “You’ve got to be two people to do this.”

Wendy cites a huge advantage to working with family: “I’ve got a wedding to attend in St. Augustine and I didn’t have to think twice about leaving,” she says. “Adam knows the business. There’s the accountability and reliability factor.”

Adam, who joined up with his mom 18 years ago, says the comfort level makes them more productive. And watching his mom in action taught him the business. “I was going to learn the business the real way,” he says. “I had her teach me every step of the way. I don’t think I could’ve done it without my mom’s help.”

“We found a niche with time,” Wendy says, adding that Adam’s wife now works for the firm as well.

When family time arrives, they try not to talk real estate, Wendy says. “It doesn’t always work, but we try.”

### RCC ASSOCIATES

RCC Associates is very much a family affair. Company President and CEO Beverly Raphael has two daughters working for her to keep her successful Deerfield Beach construction firm running smoothly: Lindsay Raphael is a Fort Lauderdale attorney who assists RCC with her legal expertise, while her younger sister Robyn Raphael-Dynan is director of operations.

Beverly’s late husband, Richard, began the business in Chicago in the early 1970s; she assisted him from the very beginning. When her husband passed away in 1998, she was unsure what to do and considered selling it.

“My daughters thought it was very important that I get involved with the company,” Beverly says. “I realized it would continue if I became involved. I wanted to do something to keep my husband’s memory alive.”

Robyn wanted to get into the family business a year after working somewhere else. “She worked her way up from the very bottom. She was willing to do anything,” Beverly says.

Gradually, Robyn became involved with many of RCC Associates’ major projects, including the renovation of Sun



Robyn Raphael-Dynan, Beverly Raphael and Lindsay Raphael of RCC Associates

Lillian, Jodi and Alan Macken of Macken Realty



Life Stadium “That was her big project,” Beverly says. “She learned the business hands-on and after 12 years, she became director of operations.”

When family members are involved in a business, there are, of course, different dynamics involved, and it’s important for other staff members to see there are no special rules for family. Robyn was mentored at work through her fellow associates in each of her projects. “She earned the respect of her co-workers the right way,” Beverly says. “I was mentoring her as well; I was looking at the big picture of what could be beyond that.”

Beverly says they try to draw the line between family life and business. They try not to talk business outside of the office. “This is family time,” she says. “We’re not going to do that.”

### MACKEN REALTY

Alan Macken and his sister, Jodi, have always been involved in the company founded by their mother, Lillian, in 1988. “She paved the way for us,” Alan says of his mother, adding that he went more into the development side of the business while Jodi focused more on the brokerage side. “My mom and my sister are better brokers than I’ve ever been. We all found what we were good at and stuck with it.”

Alan tried other sales jobs before going into the family business, whereas Jodi joined the company right out of school. Working together came naturally for the Mackens, Alan says; his grandfather had

also run a successful family business.

All three say there are huge advantages to operating a business as a family. “There’s a lot of trust,” Lillian says. “We all operate with love and affection, and make sure we collectively take care of the business.”

Alan says the day-to-day dynamics are different from nonfamily-run businesses in that there are no office politics.

“We listen to what each one of us has to say,” Jodi adds. “I can’t imagine my career taking any other course. I hope our future generations will work together and share our vision.”

Alan says it hasn’t been hard for them to separate work and family time. “We always set aside time for the family, he says. “When we go out for dinner with my nieces, we will be family. We try to do our business in the office. It’s healthier that way.”

And, Lillian adds, “We never leave work angry at each other.”

### ONE SOTHEBY’S

When Mayi de la Vega founded ONE Sotheby’s in December 2008, her son, Daniel, immediately came on board. Prior to joining his mother’s business, he was working for a construction and development company and

was also selling real estate. Today, he is the president as well as a shareholder of ONE Sotheby’s.

Mayi says what makes their working dynamic so special is the “absolute, unconditional trust” they have in one another. “He always has my back,” she says. “It’s a great feeling to know he has exceptional leadership skills. I trust him for who he is, not so much as my son.”

Mayi says she’s always been Daniel’s mentor at work. “I did mentor him, and I still mentor him,” she says. “One of the nice things is that he allows me to mentor him. He

doesn’t challenge me. He appreciates it.

“The only downside is that it gets into our personal life,” Mayi continues. “We always wind up talking about work. But it also gives us an opportunity to share lots of things together. We have learned to put down boundaries, especially on the weekends.”



ONE Sotheby's Daniel and Mayi de la Vega