Like father, like son

When working with Dad is business as usual

By WENDY STRAKER

It’s 9 a.m. on a Friday, and Albert Babaev, 28, is busy mopping the linoleum floors of the Dr. Mike and Son barbershop. Albert’s father, Dr. Mike, gets in closer to 10.

“I’m the one who gets everything ready,” says Albert, which means washing the floors, preparing the work stations, managing the appointment book and making sure there are clean towels for the customers.

While some might find it odd that Albert still comes in early every morning to swab the floors of his own shop, which sits on Church Street near City Hall, to him it makes perfect sense.

“If you don’t do it yourself, it won’t get done right,” he says. “I can get other people to do it but...
WHEN OLD SCHOOL MEETS NEW

For Albert Babaev, who briefly pursued a career in telecommunications before deciding to pick up a pair of clippers, working with "Pop" wasn't always as smooth as it is today, especially in the beginning.

"We opened the shop, it was like the old school and the new school coming together. We had a different work ethic," he says.

His father laughs. "He was young. He was always late for work or wanting to be free."

"To "Dr. Mike," a 53-year-old Jewish man from Uzbekistan, a full day's work meant no less than 12 hours. To Albert, it meant half that.

"My dad's mentality was very different. If you weren't in the shop, you were wasting time. I was more relaxed than that."

Eventually they found a middle ground. In fact, now it's Albert who works the long hours — and tries to persuade his father to relax a little bit.

"I saw how hard my dad was working at Astor Place, which is why I pushed him to open the shop with me in the first place," says Albert — who used to cut schoolmates' hair in high school for pocket money.

"It was a way to help another another. He's helping me secure a future, and I'm giving him the opportunity to cut back without losing money."

Harris Lane, who has moved into the management side at Hank Lane Music, has a similar mentality when it comes to the family business.

"I never want my father to worry that something isn't being taken care of," he says. "He built this business from nothing. He had to claw his way to the top. The least I can do is to make sure we stay there."

"It's important to back each other up," says Stephen Lari. "When my father finally offered me a job, he said, "If this is what we're doing to do, work as a family, then I don't want to hear about who brought in what deal and who had a better year. You (and your brother) are both equal. You sink or swim collectively and, the moment I hear about one person getting a bigger ego or wanting more is the moment I'll liquidate everything and we can go off and do our own thing.' That really stuck with us."

So far, squabbles and ego clashes haven't caused problems with business — or within the family.

"I feel lucky," says Alex Lari. "None of my friends' kids wanted to work with them. They all ask me, "How did you do it?" I say I bribed them."

THE EXTRA MILE

Lari is joking, of course, but he touches on something that can be sensitive when Dad is the boss: the issue of special treatment. Fathers and sons alike say they're eager to nip in the bud any notions that Junior is riding on Senior's coattails.

"If anything, you have to work harder to prove yourself," says Harris Lane. "A lot of people were jealous when I joined the business full-time. People were working their way up, and then I come in. They were all just waiting to see if I really had talent. It meant I had to go the extra mile."

Eric Vilenic says, "Until you do something really meaningful, there are going to be those people that are skeptical. There are people who have been working here as long as I've been alive — and some of them are the same people I used to terrorize when I was a kid, running around the warehouse with a nail gun. It's an interesting dynamic."

Which is not to say he has any regrets about his decision.

"I've never doubted it," he says.

Neither has John Lari, who left college early to help his father when his business took a tough turn, and has never left.

"He made it clear that if I wanted to pursue other things he would never stand in my way," says John. "Thankfully, I never wanted to."

LIFE WITH FATHER: Harris Lane grew up watching his dad Hank perform at weddings.
For these city dads and their offspring, working 9 to 5 is a family affair

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then I'd just end up doing it over again."

The minute he says this, he smiles. He knows he sounds just like his dad.

"People tell me sound more and more like my pop every day, like it's...I've learned a lot from him. I take it as a compliment."

The father-son duo have worked side by side for 10 years, first at Astor Place Haircuts, where Dr. Mike spent 20 years, and then at their own shop, which opened in August 2005.

"People always ask me, 'How do you go to work and see your dad every day?' But I see it as a privilege," he says. "If I could do it all over again, I would do things the same way."

But not the only one who feels this way. While many of us spend the majority of our adult lives trying to prove how different we are from our parents, others are happy to follow in their fathers' footsteps and turn a family bond into a day-to-day working relationship.

At times they don't know how to.

Eric Villency, president and CEO of Maurice Villency, a 75-year-old furniture company started by his grandfather, took his time before deciding to join the family business. Out of college, he took a job in finance, but found the lack of creativity stifling. He then dabbled in professional modeling for a bit before realizing that where he wanted to be was working for his dad.

"I used to make fun of my father growing up because he was always feeling the sides of chairs," he says. "Now I find myself doing all the time. I don't know; maybe it's an acquired taste. Or maybe it was getting my own apartment and my own things that opened my eyes to discovering my design sense. Whatever it was, my decision was pretty clear."

For Stephen Lari, 34, the route to his father's real estate company, the Claremont Group, was more direct. It was just a matter of when he'd come on board, says Lari, who today owns the business with his 32-year-old brother, John.

"My brother and I spent our high school summers at Alex's job sites, and I think we both knew, even then, that this was what we wanted to do," he says, referring to his father, as is his habit, by his first name.

"We grew up seeing how hard my dad worked and how much pride he took in literally building a life for us. I saw it as a privilege, and an opportunity to carry on the family name."

With that in mind, when Lari finished business school, he called his father and asked for a job. His father's answer: No.

"I wanted him to go out and learn about the banking part of the business," says Alex Lari. "I remember him asking, 'Why do you insist I go out and get a finance job?' And I said, 'For starters, because I can't pay you the kind of money they can. I knew he'd come back eventually.'"

PRODIGAL SON

For veteran wedding singer Hank Lane, leader of the Hank Lane Orchestra, it was a different story. He thought he'd lost his son to the world of medicine.

"Harris wanted to become a doctor," he says. "Harris had literally grown up by the side of the stage, being carted to weddings every weekend so his parents wouldn't have to leave him with a sitter. Later, he spent summers performing at weddings and bar mitzvahs. But during the school year, he returned to study medicine."

"What could I do? I couldn't try and talk him out of it," says Hank.

He didn't have to. During Harris's second MCAT class, it hit him just how much he'd miss if he left the family business.

"I was always looking forward to the weekends, when I would play the parties," he says. "That day in class, that was my epiphany. I was like, 'Wait a second, this isn't what I'm supposed to be doing.'"

For many parents, hearing that a son was dropping out of medical school might not be a happy memory, but it was thrilled," admits Hank.

"Today Harris's combo is the requested band for A-list events like Sean "P-Diddy" Combsâ€™ 35th birthday. Now people refer to him," Hank quips.

But it's obvious Harris still looks up to his father.

"I remember the first time I saw my dad sing Sinatra," he says. "I was in complete awe."

His father interrupts.

"Now we are in awe of him."

And so it goes.

"There's something so incredible about working with your kids," gushes Ken Olin, executive producer of the NBC show "Brothers and Sisters." His son Cliff, 23, is a staff writer on his show, and his daughter Roxy, 21, has a recurring guest role.

"I never understood it until now," says Olin, whose father worked in his father's business. "But now I see my family on set, and I'm like, 'Oh my god, I'm just so in love with my kids.' And it's not like I have to do anything to create those moments. They just happen because we're in each other's lives. It's just so natural."

Well, as natural as working for your father can be. As anyone who's grown up in a family knows, family bonds can complicate things — and as anyone who's ever earned a paycheck knows, tensions arise on any job.

"Of course we have our disagreements," says Cliff. "But when we do, I try not to hold back; we say exactly what's on our minds and then we move on. We're a lot like the Walkers that way," he says, referring to the fictitious family on the show. "It's no holdbacks, because when it's your family, it's safe. You know they're going to love you tomorrow no matter what."

HEIR TO THE HAIR: Albert Babaev (right) works side by side with his dad at Dr. Mike and Son on Church Street.

60SECONDS WITH

Your new "Buzz: How to Create It and Win With It," is a self-help business book. What advice do you offer? It's four basic rules, and they apply wherever you're in politics or an insurance agent. First, you have to be knowledgeable in your field. Second, you have to be yourself — if you try to be someone else, everyone will know it's phony. Third, you have to be honest. And finally, "Be not afraid." It's the title of a Catholic hymn I love, and for me it means, don't worry about walking the same path as everybody else. Give into your own instincts and get off the beaten path occasionally, and that will distinguish you.

In the book you talk about creating buzz. You were a master at that, but it never seemed calculated. Was it?

In the beginning, people think I'm nuts when I say this, but when I became mayor, I was a relatively retiring person. But I said to myself, if I'm going to save the city from bankruptcy, I need to be bigger than life, and now it's as natural as could be. So it's in you, you just have to bring it out. We can be bigger and better than we think we are.

Have you been pública Ed Koch from a job, when you lost to David Dinkins, what advice would you give someone who's fired? The way to look at it is, it was good for them and it was good for you, because new doors will open where you'll be even happier. And you have to love your job. I still jump out of bed in the morning and run to work.

— Chris Erikson