‘We are just stewards of something that’s bigger than we are’

Family businesses navigate succession planning

By ABBEY McDONALD
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Three-year old Winnie Van Dusen puttered toward the pallet stacked with Pepsi bottles, eyes wide and both hands stiff on the steering wheel of her new toy car. She was not turning away to avoid an imminent, but gentle, collision.

Her cousin, 9-year-old Alina Čitović, helped correct her trajectory from the front as her dad, Willis Van Dusen Jr., held onto the back fender. They collaborated to steer the toddler away from any obstacles.

Her grandfather, Willis Van Dusen, laughed as he encouraged her to turn the wheel, appearing delighted by the mild chaos brought by his birthday gift to Winnie. Van Dusen, Van Dusen Jr., and Alina’s mom, Trudy Van Dusen Čitović, are the owners of Van Dusen Beverages in Astoria, the oldest business in the state.

It’s too early to know whether Winnie, Alina or either of their brothers will be part of the next generation to own the Pepsi distributorship.

“I had the same feeling when I was Alina’s age, that they’d talk about the history, and it didn’t really sink in. It didn’t mean much,” said Van Dusen, a former mayor of Astoria. “Then, as you get older, you start appreciating it more and we start preserving the history. And I couldn’t be prouder to have my family continue the business.”

Between the pandemic shaking up the economy and the baby boomer generation retiring, succession has been on the minds of many business owners on the North Coast.

It’s also been bringing owners to ask the Clatsop Community College Small Business Development Center for advice, said Jessica Newhall, a business adviser and the associate director of the development center.

“This is a really exciting time in succession and business planning and there’s a lot of transactions and activity taking place,” Newhall said.

She said often businesses come to the center for support in creating a plan to transition out of ownership.

“A lot of times with business owners, the psychology of succession planning can be very difficult, because so much of their identity and day-to-day living is wrapped up in their business,” she said. “So part of it is making sure that somebody is ready to transition out of their business from an emotional standpoint, and then making sure that they understand the financial side of succession planning and retirement planning around their business.”

‘It’s a one-of-a-kind thing’

The Van Dusen family name has been synonymous with business since 1849.

First established as Van Dusen Mercantile, the family had various endeavors in the last century, including insurance sales. Van Dusen Beverages

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LYDIA ELY/THE ASTORIAN
The Van Dusen family poses for a portrait outside Van Dusen Beverages in Astoria.