

FOCUS

Keeping it in the FAMILY

Family businesses in Australia are flourishing and The Rocks is no exception.

Our relationships with family are some of the most enduring and sustaining of our lives. We pour emotional energy into our bonds with lovers and friends, and although family relationships can be fraught and prone to fractures, it's family ties that are the strongest.

Family businesses are one of the best examples of a successful family entity – and in Australia they are flourishing. An estimated two-thirds of Australian businesses are family-owned and operated according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics with 20 per cent of people in our workforce classed as owner-managers, which means these family businesses provide many of the country's jobs.

The Rocks area, often referred to as a village, is itself one big family. Most of its elderly residents have lived in the area their entire lives. Many of its businesses first opened in The Rocks decades ago. And the area's history involves families who have lived by the wharves for generations.

In this environment, family businesses thrive. Michael Lacey, who with wife Aviva owns Natural Selection Souvenirs in the Metcalfe Arcade, says there are a lot of friends in the area who have a lot in common. "We stop in for a chat periodically," Michael says. "We've all grown old together; seen our children grow from babies to young adults."

While The Rocks' village-quality encourages family businesses into the area that alone does not make them work. For a family business to be successful, its owners need to be clear about their goals and expectations. Usually they are able to evolve each person's role so that he or she has a well-defined place within the business. They must quickly recover from disputes, which can easily flare and be more searing than those in non-family businesses. There's a flipside to that too – in conflict resolution they've got a huge advantage: they're family!

Michael Lacey founded his business in 1978 with his parents, Shirley and Barry. Before too long, Michael's wife Aviva joined them.

While their three children were young, she was able to work from home. Now she's at his side behind the counter every day, and they wouldn't have it any other way. "We're both people-people," Aviva says. "We really love the area and do a lot of tour guide things, telling people where to get a coffee and to go up to Observatory Hill and see the view. We get to talk to people from all over the world. So it would be really hard to replace this. It's really a joy."

Michael's parents were both very active in the business right up until they passed away. Barry in 1990 and Shirley in 2004. Without them, Michael and Aviva had to shuffle some roles and get to know their business a whole lot better. "Up until then I had it fairly easy," Michael says. "My mother and father had always handled the administration, so having to take that on board was quite a learning curve."

Since then the couple has settled in comfortably. "We're here in the shop together most days," Michael says. "I take care of the packaging and posting of parcels,

we send a lot of goods overseas, and sales – the more physical side." Aviva is responsible for accounts and other computer work.

"Working together is always a challenge for a family," Michael says. Aviva agrees. "Lots of people say they'd kill their partner in a second if they had to work with them. It took us a while to find a balance. You have to have a sense of humour because you can't fight in front of the public," she says. "There's an ease in communicating and sharing the load. He says he does the physical work and

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I do the rest, but really we can just share. We're complementary – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Husband and wife teams are the mainstay of many family businesses. Mother and daughter partnerships like Dee Ladd-Hudson and Olivia Cox who run The Rocks Walking

Tours, are far less common. In popular culture, mother and daughter relationships exist in two main forms: best friends or fierce competitors. You need watch just one episode of the TV drama *Desperate Housewives* to get a taste of each. In reality, these relationships are much more complex: varied and rewarding. A former secretary Dee began working for the business as a guide. It was this job that sparked her love of history and gave her the encouragement she needed to

undertake a degree in the subject. She worked for The Rocks Walking Tours on and off, between her time at university and stints working for the Historic Houses Trust, and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service at Fort Denison, Goat Island and the Quarantine Station. →

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In this story...
Natural Selection Souvenirs
Metcalfe Arcade
80-84 George Street
☎ 9247 9174
The Rocks Walking Tours
23 Playfair Street
☎ 9247 6678
Swagman's Post Courtyard Cafe
35 George Street
☎ 9241 5557

Left: Olivia and Dee from The Rocks Walking Tours
Right: Michael and Aviva from Natural Selection Souvenirs

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Left: Sevan and Shant take a break in the garden courtyard of the Swagman's Post Courtyard Cafe

now, each with his first baby, they're able to see each other on a daily basis. They play touch football together once a week too. "Sevan and I can have a disagreement and laugh about it two minutes later. I think the key to it is having parents who communicate with you every now and again when you have an issue, and two brothers who understand each other's needs," Shant says.

They trod different paths before reaching this point. Sevan undertook a degree in communications, while Shant trained as a motor mechanic and studied for a diploma in business management. "While I was an apprentice I worked in hospitality. I used to manage bars in the city and our parents owned a cafe in Paddington for many years. When Sevan came home from uni he'd help them out a bit, and I'd help them out a bit as well." These days, Sevan mainly looks after the front of house, and Shant the accounts, stock rotation and the kitchen. And Shant enjoys his time tweaking his own cars, rather than fixing other people's.

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One thing's for sure, they love The Rocks. Many of their customers are locals, some of them long-time residents of the area who stop in every day. They've filled the brothers in on the history of the area including tales of former residents of the terrace that houses their cafe. Nita McRae, an activist who fought to achieve restoration (and ultimately, heritage listing) of many of The Rocks' buildings. As Shant says: "The Rocks is the place to be. It's a vibrant city location which is stand alone in its heritage, its culture and its streetscape." •