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Family Business

It's father-daughters, sister-sister for first Burger 21 franchisees

Running a restaurant isn't easy for anyone, but when your business partners are family members, like Dennis Saller and his daughters, having a strong foundation and developing a thick skin are key.

There's a saying that goes father knows best. Well, that wasn't the case for Dennis Saller, who ignored his daughter's suggestion to open a Chick-fil-A when space became available in Melbourne, Florida. Another buyer came in and turned that location into one of the top-grossing Chick-fil-As in the nation.

Talk about a missed opportunity. But, to be fair, Dennis' daughter, Mary Alison, was only 8 at the time. "Not surprisingly, he didn't take my advice," says Mary Alison, the smile obvious in her voice.

Two years ago, however, the now 27-year-old tried again, telling her dad about Burger 21, the fast-casual restaurant franchise looking to define its own "beyond-the-better-burger" category. Mary Alison had just moved to Tampa, where Burger 21 is headquartered, and after dining at the restaurant, she presented the idea to her dad. "And he finally listened to me," she says.

Today, the father-daughter-daughter team (Dennis' middle daughter Whitney Prieto also joined) is the first Burger 21 franchisee and is about to celebrate one year in business at their Orlando location near



the Mall at Millenia. Since its founding in 2010, Burger 21 has opened nine locations and has 17 franchised restaurants in development across the country.

The timing was right, says Dennis, 62. He'd built his own successful dental practice over 29 years and a larger dental corporation came in ready to buy. But it wasn't until the trio attended an informational session that they really started to get excited.

"People are looking for a fast-casual atmosphere, but they're also looking for something that has really good food," says Dennis. Burger 21 has both, he says, with an array of craft burgers and shakes served in a modern restaurant showing hints of the nostalgic diner.

The response from customers has been positive, says Dennis, with the first year "far exceeding our expectations." But it hasn't always been easy.

"We really didn't know what we were getting ourselves into," says Dennis. Though he'd run his own business, neither he nor his daughters had any restaurant management experience and they relied on training from their franchisor to learn the ropes.

The only thing they knew, says Whitney, 31, is she and Mary Alison would take management positions so they'd have their hands in everything. It wasn't until they'd each been trained in all aspects of running their Burger 21 restaurant that they discussed specific roles.

"We sat down and said OK, what do you feel most comfortable with," says Whitney. Mary Alison, whose background is in human resources, opted to focus on the front of the house, which Whitney says worked perfectly because she wanted back-of-the-house responsibilities.

Recognizing each other's strengths and weaknesses, says FranChoice consultant Meg Schmitz, is a key component of owning a business with family members. "Because you know each other so well, you need to focus on getting the right personalities in the right places," she says. Schmitz also stresses the importance of hiring the right people in support roles. "You cannot do it all," she says. "You pay people per hour to do those other jobs. Your job as owner is to run a business."

Dennis, whose focus is on the financial side (he put up most of the money but Whitney and Mary Alison are also financially committed), acknowledges it's difficult to see his daughters deal with the unavoidable stresses of business ownership, putting in seemingly endless hours at the restaurant. But, he says, "they both have that same work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit" that helped him build his practice.

"I think we've all learned the restaurant business isn't a cakewalk," says Whitney. "But over time we've also learned how to handle it."

Part of what helps them handle it, Whitney continues, is a "really strong family foundation." "I think anyone that's considering a family business needs that," she says. "We don't hold a grudge," adds Mary Alison.

They've all developed a little thicker skin in the process, says Dennis, and have learned that when you're running a business "sometimes you have to leave your differences at the door."

The same goes for when they leave the restaurant. "We make sure we have a good work/life balance," says Mary Alison. "When we do family stuff we don't talk about Burger 21."

That's not always easy, concedes Whitney, because even though she and her sister have a lot more time together than before, it's usually spent at the restaurant and getting together outside of work is sometimes difficult. Nevertheless, "it's a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain," she says.

Ultimately, Dennis says, the effort is well worth it and everything they've learned will help as they look for locations two and three in the Orlando area.

"I just think it's a wonderful opportunity to get family involved in a business where everyone can contribute," he says. "When you have family members where everyone is committed, it's always great to rely on them rather than just some person you hired."

The parent-child combination in franchising is increasingly popular, Schmitz says, as economic conditions continue to affect the hiring of recent grads, and when done right can be rewarding. "When you've got smart kids with a great work ethic, together you can be exponentially more successful," she says.

