

PROFILE

JEAN BARTELL BARBER:

Finding Her Way Home to the Family Business By Aaron Ragan-Fore

Jean Bartell Barber (BA 1975) never thought she'd wind up in the family business. The Bartells have become a Northwest drugstore dynasty, but Barber always assumed that her older brother alone would carry on the family retail tradition.

"As a girl growing up in the 1950s, no one assumed it was going to be my deal," she says. Ironically, Barber is now the CFO and co-owner of the business that her grandfather founded.

Barber's father, former Bartell Drugs CEO George H. Bartell, Jr., encouraged his daughter to keep her interests broad and explore opportunities beyond the Northwest. After attending Queen Anne High School in Seattle, Barber took her parents' advice and went to school out of state. After a year at a small college in Michigan, however, Barber knew that the University of Washington was right for her.

"I came back to the UW because I knew the Business School could offer the breadth in business education that, as a sophomore, I knew I wanted," Barber explains.

Mathematically minded from a young age, Barber majored in general business administration. She also found time for a part-time job as a bookkeeper for her father's company. It was a bit like being thrown into the deep end.

"A great way to obtain an incredible foundation in accounting," Barber laughs, "is to actually do the books, on your own, by yourself."



Even after her three-year sojourn back in the Northwest, Barber still did not seriously consider taking a management position at Bartell. Her aptitude for finance led her to Seafirst, where she completed their management training program, then to Pennsylvania to pursue her MBA at Wharton.

In graduate school, Barber found that her UW education had prepared her well for the curriculum. "The students who'd never had any business education really struggled, because they really didn't get that bookkeeping side of it," explains Barber. "The accounting classes that I took at the UW were especially valuable."

Wharton was significant for another reason as well—it's where Jean met her future husband Dave Barber, now

an independent investment real estate consultant in Seattle. Shortly after graduation the couple was married and moved to North Carolina, where Barber threw herself back into banking with determination.

"It was important for me to go and work somewhere [other than Bartell Drugs], because I didn't want to feel like I was being treated differently," explains Barber. "You just always have that nagging thing in the back of your mind that says, 'If I don't go and work for somebody else, how do I know if I really am doing a great job?'"

The Barbars moved to Seattle in 1990 to be close to Jean's extended family, and to raise their growing family.

In 1993, Barber began working part-time at Bartell in the insurance unit and as a technology manager. The company finally felt right, and Barber was promoted to chief financial officer in 1997.

"It was only after I moved back to Seattle and was raising my family, and wanted a part-time job that I came back to the company at all," says Barber.

All the same, it seems fitting that Barber returned to her birthright. Her family created Bartell Drugs, and has managed the chain for over a century. Barber's grandfather, George H. Bartell, Sr., purchased the first drugstore of his future empire on downtown Seattle's Jackson Street in 1890, at a time when the city had only 4,000 residents.

The enterprise grew up along with the city, and is the oldest family-owned drugstore chain in the nation. Bartell Drugs now boasts 53 storefronts in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties, and has become a trusted and reliable fixture in Puget Sound communities and commerce.

Keeping the chain a manageable size allows company executives to remain hands-on, and ensures accountability for every employee.

"We're very unusual in that we're now starting our 115th year, and we're only on the third generation," explains Barber. "Our store managers know that they're part of the business, that they're more connected because we're a smaller company."

The organization clearly values its identity as a family-focused company founded specifically on regional health, history and business. Barber and her older brother, George D. Bartell, CEO of Bartell Drugs, rely on legacy as a source of strength.

"You can't divorce the fact that we're a family owned business, from our business," Barber stresses. "It gives personality to the business."

Even with a company as agile as Bartell Drugs, advances are hard-earned in a legacy environment. Bartell admits that the family connection can be "a two-edged sword."



"It's harder, I think, to be dynamic and cutting edge when you're a family business."

Keys to Barber's ability to champion innovation at the drug company include her education and her external career in the banking industry. Barber credits lessons learned at UW and at Wharton for her ability to bring to her job "stronger financial skills than we've had in the past."

Her skills as a banker have allowed Barber to introduce a level of diversity to the company's business plan. "I knew that the Bartell way wasn't the only way," she asserts. "Things change, our marketplace evolves, so we need to evolve with it."

One facet of that evolution is the creation of a training program for the youngest members of the Bartell clan. Barber has an 18-year-old daughter named Evelyn, and two sons, Hugh, 16, and Neal, 13. Her brother, George, has several younger children. The family has developed a low-key training program, starting with a day spent with employees in an area of interest, and culminating with the option of a paid summer job. Evelyn observed a graphic designer in the marketing department. Last year Hugh spent the day with a pharmacist. Neal recently sat in on a buyer's meeting.

The Bartell family wants the next generation to find its own way, but Barber and the company she represents are still preparing the kids for a life in the retail drug sector, just in case the family business proves intriguing to them after all. It's a new twist on a century-old legacy, and one that Barber applauds. After all, Barber herself traveled down an unconventional path to find her way back to the business in which she grew up.

"I think what that legacy does more than anything is to give people trust that we've been here, we know what we're doing, we're a part of Seattle," she says. "They can trust that we will be there. We're their neighbors."