

# Building a dream

*Generational transitions can be tricky.*

*My father and brother expect to beat the odds.*

BY MECHELE R. DILLARD

**M**Y YOUNGER BROTHER began working in my father's business, Ellijay Cabinet in Ellijay, Ga., when he was just a child. Today my brother is 34 and training to take over the business when my father retires in a few years.

They face long odds. "The typical scenario is, only about 30% of generational transitions work," Joseph H. Astrachan, director of the Cox Family Enterprise Center, at Kennesaw State University, told me. Hearing this statistic, I wondered: Will my dad and brother become part of the failed majority? Have they considered how their roles will shift over time and how these changes will affect the long-term viability of Ellijay Cabinet, or have they just been "winging it"?

"I never thought about Michael being in this business one way or the other," my dad, Bill Dillard, said to me, shaking his head.

"Michael started working here when he was around 12, as a helper—hold this, hand me that, sweep the floors. As he got older, he just grew into it."

Today Michael is an owner, but it took time. "Getting married in 1998 changed his work habits," explained Bill, 60. "He realized he wasn't working for himself anymore."

Ultimately, however, the transition from worker to owner is difficult, warned Astrachan. Studies of family businesses much larger than Ellijay Cabinet suggest that "if the older generation is in for more than 14 years, the younger generation does have a

harder time afterwards," he noted.

But, according to my dad, who started Ellijay Cabinet in 1982, Michael is the reason it is still in the family. "The part he does is really technical—installing cabinets, working with people, pleasing them, finishing the jobs and doing it the way it needs to be done—and if he wasn't as qualified as he is, I wouldn't fool with it at my age."

Recently, the business expanded to two shops. "At first, I was running back and forth between the two," Bill

we need something, we can just build it. We won't have to order it and wait on it." But when I asked Bill about future plans, he stated firmly, "I do not want to expand anymore."

Clearly, father and son have different ideas about the future of their business. But it's equally clear that what keeps it all working is the respect they show for one another, both as father and son and as men.

"We can trust each other like just a boss and foreman can't," Michael explained. "And I respect him. He respects me. We argue, but we work it out."

"A lot of people cannot work with their kids," Bill observed. "They can't get over being the boss. But it's not like I know everything in the world about cabinets. If Michael has a better way, we'll do it that way."

As I think about the 70% who will not make it, I realize that the transition is more than just one generation passing a business to the next. It's a transition of relationships. Parents must let go and allow their children to become adults. "One of the hardest things for parents to do," said Astrachan, "is to let their kids make mistakes, because it feels awful." But he suggested that a successful transition is worth this short-term discomfort.

My father agreed. "This is Michael's business," he concluded with a shrug. "He wants it." He smiled. "Eventually, he'll run it all." **FB**

*Mechele R. Dillard is a student at Kennesaw State University in Georgia.*



**'We can trust each other': From left, Michael, Mechele and Bill Dillard in front of a custom hickory kitchen built by Ellijay Cabinet for client D.C.J. Builders in Ellijay, Ga.**

explained. "But Michael came to me and said he wanted to run the other shop. I said, 'Great! I've been waiting for you to make that decision for years!'"

Growth has been steady, but there have been some rough spots. My dad has reached the apex of what he would like to do with the company, whereas my brother, who plans to continue cabinetmaking for another 30 years, is looking for ways to increase business.

Michael would like to build a door shop. "It just makes sense," he told me. "It will save money, and when