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Westmount Florist has stamen power

BY **MONIQUE POLAK, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE** FEBRUARY 26, 2013 7:24 AM

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From left, David, Stephen, Christine and Peter Pickrell at their story. The family's first Westmount Florist store opened in 1962 and the business has changed with the times.

Photograph by: Phil Carpenter, The Gazette

MONTREAL — Christine Pickrell likes telling the story of how her father, George, the founder of Westmount Florist, got into the flower business at the age of 18. "He walked into the McGill University greenhouse. Later that day, he saw a pedlar selling carnations on the street," she said. "He decided flowers were a pretty good business, with good margins," added Christine's brother Peter.

George Pickrell trained on the job, working in flower shops in Montreal and Toronto before he and his wife, Dora, opened their first shop on Ste. Catherine St. near Greene Ave., in 1962. Dora did the paperwork; George and an assistant ran the store.

It would prove to be a profitable partnership. A half-century later, after a move to Victoria Ave., the addition of more family members to the business, and the opening of a second store in Pointe-Claire, the business is still going strong.

Though George died in 2006, it would likely please him to know that his four children, a nephew, and now, two grandchildren are running the business, and still getting along — mostly.

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“There’s sibling rivalry,” said Lauren Pickrell, 27. Lauren, George’s granddaughter, works at the flagship store on Victoria. Her father, Peter, George’s eldest son, runs the Pointe-Claire branch. “The Victoria Ave. store is busier. We complain when the other store needs something in a hurry,” Lauren explained.

Peter remembers the early years on Victoria, where his parents relocated in 1976. A Steinberg’s grocery store and a Cantors bakery were among the few businesses there at the time. His mother took phone orders upstairs and sent them downstairs with the family dog. “Mom would phone downstairs and say: ‘The dog is coming down.’ We’d whistle for the dog, get the order, and give the dog a Milk-Bone,” Peter said.

But things have changed on Victoria — and in the flower business. The strip of Victoria below Sherbrooke St. has become a popular shopping destination. And over the years, Montrealers have developed a taste for flowers. “People have flowers they buy for themselves in their homes year-round,” Christine said.

Funerals no longer represent big business for florists. “Now funeral directors often ask for donations instead,” Peter explained. Another change is that fresh flowers are now available in grocery stores and dépanneurs. But the Pickrells know their customers in a way grocery stores cannot. “We have one customer who wants only white lilies. If someone called wanting to send her sunflowers, we’d discourage that,” Christine said.

In 1981, Peter opened the Pointe-Claire branch. Christine and her brother Stephen joined the business that year. “George put flowers in front of each of us and said: ‘Make an arrangement.’ He looked at Stephen’s and said, ‘You’re in the office.’ He looked at mine and said, ‘You’re in design,’” Christine recalled.

This clear division of tasks helps to keep things running smoothly. Peter, now 58, and his cousin Danny Lourenço, 48, continue to run the Pointe-Claire operation; David, 57, purchases flowers at an inter-provincial auction and at on-line international auctions; Stephen, 54, handles administration; Christine, 53, does design and works with customers. George’s grandchildren Lauren and Brent helped co-ordinate the website.

Good-natured ribbing is part of the Pickrell family dynamic. When Brent, 23, who is about to graduate from Concordia’s John Molson School of Business, says he’ll be spending “more time at the store,” his father Stephen asks, “What do you mean ‘more time’? It’s full-time!”

Over the years, the Westmount store’s Jewish clientele has grown. Christine credits a longtime customer, Peggy Shapiro, for the change. “She walked in here one day in 1986 and said, ‘You have to do something about your store.’ At the time, we had burlap curtains and barn wood on the walls,” Christine recalled.

The Pickrells took Shapiro’s advice, spending nearly half-a-million dollars on renovations. “The next year, our sales doubled,” Stephen said. Jewish holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashanah now bring in more business than Christmas and Easter.

Peggy Shapiro still drops by the store most Mondays to buy a bouquet. “My husband, Gerry, isn’t the romantic sort. He told me long ago, ‘Go buy it if you want it.’ So I do,” she said.

Perhaps the most important reason this family business is still going strong is that George gave a lot of thought to the future, preparing a succession plan and partnership agreement. In 2005, George gave the business to his children and nephew. One of the agreement’s terms is

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that if a partner retires, the others must buy him out over a 10-year period. Shares cannot be transferred to the shareholders' children, and must revert to the remaining shareholders.

The Pickrells do their best to give back to the community that has sustained them. Every week, they send stems that are past their selling date to the Montreal General Hospital's Palliative Care Unit and to several West Island seniors' residences.

Christine thinks her father would approve. "Before he died, he made me promise, 'Don't sell the business and don't ever let it split up the family,'" she said.

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